

**HOW
DEMOCRACIES
DIE**

**STEVEN LEVITSKY &
DANIEL ZIBLATT**

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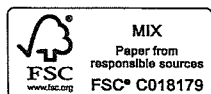
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To our families:

Liz Mineo and Alejandra Mineo-Levitsky

& Suriya, Lilah, and Talia Ziblatt

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Introduction

Is our democracy in danger? It is a question we never thought we'd be asking. We have been colleagues for fifteen years, thinking, writing, and teaching students about failures of democracy in other places and times—Europe's dark 1930s, Latin America's repressive 1970s. We have spent years researching new forms of authoritarianism emerging around the globe. For us, how and why democracies die has been an occupational obsession.

But now we find ourselves turning to our own country. Over the past two years, we have watched politicians say and do things that are unprecedented in the United States—but that we recognize as having been the precursors of democratic crisis in other places. We feel dread, as do so many other Americans, even as we try to reassure ourselves that *things can't really be that bad here*. After all, even though we know democracies are always fragile, the one in which we live has somehow managed to defy gravity. Our Constitution, our national creed of freedom and equality, our historically robust middle class, our high levels of wealth and education, and our large, diversified

private sector—all these should inoculate us from the kind of democratic breakdown that has occurred elsewhere.

Yet, we worry. American politicians now treat their rivals as enemies, intimidate the free press, and threaten to reject the results of elections. They try to weaken the institutional buffers of our democracy, including the courts, the intelligence services, and ethics offices. America may not be alone. Scholars are increasingly concerned that democracy may be under threat worldwide—even in places where its existence has long been taken for granted. Populist governments have assaulted democratic institutions in Hungary, Turkey, and Poland. Extremist forces have made dramatic electoral gains in Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe. And in the United States, for the first time in history, a man with no experience in public office, little observable commitment to constitutional rights, and clear authoritarian tendencies was elected president.

What does all of this mean? Are we living through the decline and fall of one of the world's oldest and most successful democracies?

At midday on September 11, 1973, after months of mounting tensions in the streets of Santiago, Chile, British-made Hawker Hunter jets swooped overhead, dropping bombs on La Moneda, the neoclassical presidential palace in the center of the city. As the bombs continued to fall, La Moneda burned. President Salvador Allende, elected three years earlier at the head of a leftist coalition, was barricaded inside. During his term, Chile had been wracked by social unrest, economic crisis, and political paralysis. Allende had said he would not leave his post until he had finished his job—but now the moment of truth had arrived. Under the command of General Augusto Pinochet, Chile's armed forces

were seizing control of the country. Early in the morning on that fateful day, Allende offered defiant words on a national radio broadcast, hoping that his many supporters would take to the streets in defense of democracy. But the resistance never materialized. The military police who guarded the palace had abandoned him; his broadcast was met with silence. Within hours, President Allende was dead. So, too, was Chilean democracy.

This is how we tend to think of democracies dying: at the hands of men with guns. During the Cold War, coups d'état accounted for nearly three out of every four democratic breakdowns. Democracies in Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Thailand, Turkey, and Uruguay all died this way. More recently, military coups toppled Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 and Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014. In all these cases, democracy dissolved in spectacular fashion, through military power and coercion.

But there is another way to break a democracy. It is less dramatic but equally destructive. Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders—presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power. Some of these leaders dismantle democracy quickly, as Hitler did in the wake of the 1933 Reichstag fire in Germany. More often, though, democracies erode slowly, in barely visible steps.

In Venezuela, for example, Hugo Chávez was a political outsider who railed against what he cast as a corrupt governing elite, promising to build a more “authentic” democracy that used the country's vast oil wealth to improve the lives of the poor. Skillfully tapping into the anger of ordinary Venezuelans, many of whom felt ignored or mistreated by the established political parties, Chávez was elected president in 1998. As a woman in Chávez's home state of Barinas put it on election

night, “Democracy is infected. And Chávez is the only antibiotic we have.”

When Chávez launched his promised revolution, he did so democratically. In 1999, he held free elections for a new constituent assembly, in which his allies won an overwhelming majority. This allowed the *chavistas* to single-handedly write a new constitution. It was a democratic constitution, though, and to reinforce its legitimacy, new presidential and legislative elections were held in 2000. Chávez and his allies won those, too. Chávez’s populism triggered intense opposition, and in April 2002, he was briefly toppled by the military. But the coup failed, allowing a triumphant Chávez to claim for himself even more democratic legitimacy.

It wasn’t until 2003 that Chávez took his first clear steps toward authoritarianism. With public support fading, he stalled an opposition-led referendum that would have recalled him from office—until a year later, when soaring oil prices had boosted his standing enough for him to win. In 2004, the government blacklisted those who had signed the recall petition and packed the supreme court, but Chávez’s landslide reelection in 2006 allowed him to maintain a democratic veneer. The *chavista* regime grew more repressive after 2006, closing a major television station, arresting or exiling opposition politicians, judges, and media figures on dubious charges, and eliminating presidential term limits so that Chávez could remain in power indefinitely. When Chávez, now dying of cancer, was reelected in 2012, the contest was free but not fair: *Chavismo* controlled much of the media and deployed the vast machinery of the government in its favor. After Chávez’s death a year later, his successor, Nicolás Maduro, won another questionable reelection, and in 2014, his government imprisoned a major opposition leader. Still, the opposition’s landslide victory in the 2015 legislative elections

seemed to belie critics’ claims that Venezuela was no longer democratic. It was only when a new single-party constituent assembly usurped the power of Congress in 2017, nearly two decades after Chávez first won the presidency, that Venezuela was widely recognized as an autocracy.

This is how democracies now die. Blatant dictatorship—in the form of fascism, communism, or military rule—has disappeared across much of the world. Military coups and other violent seizures of power are rare. Most countries hold regular elections. Democracies still die, but by different means. Since the end of the Cold War, most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals and soldiers but by elected governments themselves. Like Chávez in Venezuela, elected leaders have subverted democratic institutions in Georgia, Hungary, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Ukraine. Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box.

The electoral road to breakdown is dangerously deceptive. With a classic coup d’état, as in Pinochet’s Chile, the death of a democracy is immediate and evident to all. The presidential palace burns. The president is killed, imprisoned, or shipped off into exile. The constitution is suspended or scrapped. On the electoral road, none of these things happen. There are no tanks in the streets. Constitutions and other nominally democratic institutions remain in place. People still vote. Elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance.

Many government efforts to subvert democracy are “legal,” in the sense that they are approved by the legislature or accepted by the courts. They may even be portrayed as efforts to *improve* democracy—making the judiciary more efficient, combating corruption, or cleaning up the electoral process.

Newspapers still publish but are bought off or bullied into self-censorship: Citizens continue to criticize the government but often find themselves facing tax or other legal troubles. This sows public confusion. People do not immediately realize what is happening. Many continue to believe they are living under a democracy. In 2011, when a Latinobarómetro survey asked Venezuelans to rate their own country from 1 (“not at all democratic”) to 10 (“completely democratic”), 51 percent of respondents gave their country a score of 8 or higher.

Because there is no single moment—no coup, declaration of martial law, or suspension of the constitution—in which the regime obviously “crosses the line” into dictatorship, nothing may set off society’s alarm bells. Those who denounce government abuse may be dismissed as exaggerating or crying wolf. Democracy’s erosion is, for many, almost imperceptible.

How vulnerable is American democracy to this form of backsliding? The foundations of our democracy are certainly stronger than those in Venezuela, Turkey, or Hungary. But are they strong enough?

Answering such a question requires stepping back from daily headlines and breaking news alerts to widen our view, drawing lessons from the experiences of other democracies around the world and throughout history. Studying other democracies in crisis allows us to better understand the challenges facing our own democracy. For example, based on the historical experiences of other nations, we have developed a litmus test to help identify would-be autocrats before they come to power. We can learn from the mistakes that past democratic leaders have made in opening the door to would-be authoritarians—and, conversely, from the ways that other democracies have kept

extremists out of power. A comparative approach also reveals how elected autocrats in different parts of the world employ remarkably similar strategies to subvert democratic institutions. As these patterns become visible, the steps toward breakdown grow less ambiguous—and easier to combat. Knowing how citizens in other democracies have successfully resisted elected autocrats, or why they tragically failed to do so, is essential to those seeking to defend American democracy today.

We know that extremist demagogues emerge from time to time in all societies, even in healthy democracies. The United States has had its share of them, including Henry Ford, Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy, and George Wallace. An essential test for democracies is not whether such figures emerge but whether political leaders, and especially political parties, work to prevent them from gaining power in the first place—by keeping them off mainstream party tickets, refusing to endorse or align with them, and when necessary, making common cause with rivals in support of democratic candidates. Isolating popular extremists requires political courage. But when fear, opportunism, or miscalculation leads established parties to bring extremists into the mainstream, democracy is imperiled.

Once a would-be authoritarian makes it to power, democracies face a second critical test: Will the autocratic leader subvert democratic institutions or be constrained by them? Institutions alone are not enough to rein in elected autocrats. Constitutions must be defended—by political parties and organized citizens, but also by democratic norms. Without robust norms, constitutional checks and balances do not serve as the bulwarks of democracy we imagine them to be. Institutions become political weapons, wielded forcefully by those who control them against those who do not. This is how elected autocrats subvert democracy—packing and “weaponizing” the courts and other

neutral agencies, buying off the media and the private sector (or bullying them into silence), and rewriting the rules of politics to tilt the playing field against opponents. The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy—gradually, subtly, and even legally—to kill it.

America failed the first test in November 2016, when we elected a president with a dubious allegiance to democratic norms. Donald Trump's surprise victory was made possible not only by public disaffection but also by the Republican Party's failure to keep an extremist demagogue within its own ranks from gaining the nomination.

How serious is the threat now? Many observers take comfort in our Constitution, which was designed precisely to thwart and contain demagogues like Donald Trump. Our Madisonian system of checks and balances has endured for more than two centuries. It survived the Civil War, the Great Depression, the Cold War, and Watergate. Surely, then, it will be able to survive Trump.

We are less certain. Historically, our system of checks and balances *has* worked pretty well—but not, or not entirely, because of the constitutional system designed by the founders. Democracies work best—and survive longer—where constitutions are reinforced by unwritten democratic norms. Two basic norms have preserved America's checks and balances in ways we have come to take for granted: mutual toleration, or the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals, and forbearance, or the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives. These two norms undergirded American

democracy for most of the twentieth century. Leaders of the two major parties accepted one another as legitimate and resisted the temptation to use their temporary control of institutions to maximum partisan advantage. Norms of toleration and restraint served as the soft guardrails of American democracy, helping it avoid the kind of partisan fight to the death that has destroyed democracies elsewhere in the world, including Europe in the 1930s and South America in the 1960s and 1970s.

Today, however, the guardrails of American democracy are weakening. The erosion of our democratic norms began in the 1980s and 1990s and accelerated in the 2000s. By the time Barack Obama became president, many Republicans, in particular, questioned the legitimacy of their Democratic rivals and had abandoned forbearance for a strategy of winning by any means necessary. Donald Trump may have accelerated this process, but he didn't cause it. The challenges facing American democracy run deeper. The weakening of our democratic norms is rooted in extreme partisan polarization—one that extends beyond policy differences into an existential conflict over race and culture. America's efforts to achieve racial equality as our society grows increasingly diverse have fueled an insidious reaction and intensifying polarization. And if one thing is clear from studying breakdowns throughout history, it's that extreme polarization can kill democracies.

There are, therefore, reasons for alarm. Not only did Americans elect a demagogue in 2016, but we did so at a time when the norms that once protected our democracy were already coming unmoored. But if other countries' experiences teach us that that polarization can kill democracies, they also teach us that breakdown is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Drawing lessons from other democracies in crisis, this book suggests

strategies that citizens should, and should *not*, follow to defend our democracy.

Many Americans are justifiably frightened by what is happening to our country. But protecting our democracy requires more than just fright or outrage. We must be humble *and* bold. We must learn from other countries to see the warning signs—and recognize the false alarms. We must be aware of the fateful missteps that have wrecked other democracies. And we must see how citizens have risen to meet the great democratic crises of the past, overcoming their own deep-seated divisions to avert breakdown. History doesn't repeat itself. But it rhymes. The promise of history, and the hope of this book, is that we can find the rhymes before it is too late.

1

Fateful Alliances

A quarrel had arisen between the Horse and the Stag, so the Horse came to a Hunter to ask his help to take revenge on the Stag. The Hunter agreed but said: "If you desire to conquer the Stag, you must permit me to place this piece of iron between your jaws, so that I may guide you with these reins, and allow this saddle to be placed upon your back so that I may keep steady upon you as we follow the enemy." The Horse agreed to the conditions, and the Hunter soon saddled and bridled him. Then, with the aid of the Hunter, the Horse soon overcame the Stag and said to the Hunter: "Now get off, and remove those things from my mouth and back." "Not so fast, friend," said the Hunter. "I have now got you under bit and spur and prefer to keep you as you are at present."

—"The Horse, the Stag, and the Hunter," *Aesop's Fables*

On October 30, 1922, Benito Mussolini arrived in Rome at 10:55 A.M. in an overnight sleeping car from Milan. He had

been invited to the capital city by the king to accept Italy's premiership and form a new cabinet. Accompanied by a small group of guards, Mussolini first stopped at the Hotel Savoia and then, wearing a black suit jacket, black shirt, and matching black bowler hat, walked triumphantly to the king's Quirinal Palace. Rome was filled with rumors of unrest. Bands of Fascists—many in mismatched uniforms—roamed the city's streets. Mussolini, aware of the power of the spectacle, strode into the king's marble-floored residential palace and greeted him, "Sire, forgive my attire. I come from the battlefield."

This was the beginning of Mussolini's legendary "March on Rome." The image of masses of Blackshirts crossing the Rubicon to seize power from Italy's Liberal state became Fascist canon, repeated on national holidays and in children's schoolbooks throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Mussolini did his part to enshrine the myth. At the last train stop before entering Rome that day, he had considered disembarking to ride into the city on horseback surrounded by his guards. Though the plan was ultimately abandoned, afterward he did all he could to bolster the legend of his rise to power as, in his own words, a "revolution" and "insurrectional act" that launched a new Fascist epoch.

The truth was more mundane. The bulk of Mussolini's Blackshirts, often poorly fed and unarmed, arrived only after he had been invited to become prime minister. The squads of Fascists around the country were a menace, but Mussolini's machinations to take the reins of state were no revolution. He used his party's 35 parliamentary votes (out of 535), divisions among establishment politicians, fear of socialism, and the threat of violence by 30,000 Blackshirts to capture the atten-

tion of the timid King Victor Emmanuel III, who saw in Mussolini a rising political star and a means of neutralizing unrest.

With political order restored by Mussolini's appointment and socialism in retreat, the Italian stock market soared. Elder statesmen of the Liberal establishment, such as Giovanni Giolitti and Antonio Salandra, found themselves applauding the turn of events. They regarded Mussolini as a useful ally. But not unlike the horse in Aesop's fable, Italy soon found itself under "bit and spur."

Some version of this story has repeated itself throughout the world over the last century. A cast of political outsiders, including Adolf Hitler, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, came to power on the same path: from the inside, via elections or alliances with powerful political figures. In each instance, elites believed the invitation to power would *contain* the outsider, leading to a restoration of control by mainstream politicians. But their plans backfired. A lethal mix of ambition, fear, and miscalculation conspired to lead them to the same fateful mistake: willingly handing over the keys of power to an autocrat-in-the-making.

Why do seasoned elder statesmen make this mistake? There are few more gripping illustrations than the rise of Adolf Hitler in January 1933. His capacity for violent insurrection was on display as early as Munich's Beer Hall Putsch of 1923—a surprise evening strike in which his group of pistol-bearing loyalists took control of several government buildings and a Munich beer hall where Bavarian officials were meeting. The ill-conceived attack was halted by the authorities, and Hitler spent nine months in jail, where he wrote his infamous personal testament, *Mein*

Kampf. Thereafter, Hitler publicly committed to gaining power via elections. Initially, his National Socialist movement found few votes. The Weimar political system had been founded in 1919 by a prodemocratic coalition of Catholics, Liberals, and Social Democrats. But beginning in 1930, with the German economy reeling, the center-right fell prey to infighting, and the Communists and Nazis grew in popularity.

The elected government collapsed in March 1930 amid the pain of the Great Depression. With political gridlock blocking government action, the figurehead president, World War I hero Paul von Hindenburg, took advantage of a constitutional article giving the head of state the authority to name chancellors in the exceptional circumstance that parliament failed to deliver governing majorities. The aim of these unelected chancellors—and the president—was not only to govern but to sideline radicals on the left and right. First, Center Party economist Heinrich Brüning (who would later flee Germany to become a professor at Harvard) attempted, but failed, to restore economic growth; his time as chancellor was short-lived. President von Hindenburg turned next to nobleman Franz von Papen, and then, in growing despondency, to von Papen's close friend and rival, former defense minister General Kurt von Schleicher. But without parliamentary majorities in the Reichstag, stalemate persisted. Leaders, for good reason, feared the next election.

Convinced that "something must finally give," a cabal of rivalrous conservatives convened in late January 1933 and settled on a solution: A popular outsider should be placed at the head of the government. They despised him but knew that at least he had a mass following. And, most of all, they thought they could control him.

On January 30, 1933, von Papen, one of the chief architects of the plan, dismissed worries over the gamble that would make Adolf Hitler chancellor of a crisis-ridden Germany with the reassuring words: "We've engaged him for ourselves. . . . Within two months, we will have pushed [him] so far into a corner that he'll squeal." A more profound miscalculation is hard to imagine.

The Italian and German experiences highlight the type of "fateful alliance" that often elevates authoritarians to power. In any democracy, politicians will at times face severe challenges. Economic crisis, rising public discontent, and the electoral decline of mainstream political parties can test the judgment of even the most experienced insiders. If a charismatic outsider emerges on the scene, gaining popularity as he challenges the old order, it is tempting for establishment politicians who feel their control is unraveling to try to co-opt him. If an insider breaks ranks to embrace the insurgent before his rivals do, he can use the outsider's energy and base to outmaneuver his peers. And then, establishment politicians hope, the insurgent can be redirected to support their own program.

This sort of devil's bargain often mutates to the benefit of the insurgent, as alliances provide outsiders with enough respectability to become legitimate contenders for power. In early 1920s Italy, the old Liberal order was crumbling amid growing strikes and social unrest. The failure of traditional parties to forge solid parliamentary majorities left the elderly fifth-term prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti desperate, and against the wishes of advisors he called early elections in May 1921. With the aim of tapping into the Fascists' mass appeal, Giolitti decided to offer Mussolini's upstart movement a place on his electoral group's "bourgeois bloc" of Nationalists, Fascists,

and Liberals. This strategy failed—the bourgeois bloc won less than 20 percent of the vote, leading to Giolitti's resignation. But Mussolini's place on the ticket gave his ragtag group the legitimacy it would need to enable its rise.

Such fateful alliances are hardly confined to interwar Europe. They also help to explain the rise of Hugo Chávez. Venezuela had prided itself on being South America's oldest democracy, in place since 1958. Chávez, a junior military officer and failed coup leader who had never held public office, was a political outsider. But his rise to power was given a critical boost from a consummate insider: ex-president Rafael Caldera, one of the founders of Venezuelan democracy.

Venezuelan politics was long dominated by two parties, the center-left Democratic Action and Caldera's center-right Social Christian Party (known as COPEI). The two alternated in power peacefully for more than thirty years, and by the 1970s, Venezuela was viewed as a model democracy in a region plagued by coups and dictatorships. During the 1980s, however, the country's oil-dependent economy sank into a prolonged slump, a crisis that persisted for more than a decade, nearly doubling the poverty rate. Not surprisingly, Venezuelans grew disaffected. Massive riots in February 1989 suggested that the established parties were in trouble. Three years later, in February 1992, a group of junior military officers rose up against President Carlos Andrés Pérez. Led by Hugo Chávez, the rebels called themselves "Bolivarians," after revered independence hero Simón Bolívar. The coup failed. But when the now-detained Chávez appeared on live television to tell his supporters to lay down their arms (declaring, in words that would become legendary, that their mission had failed "for now"), he became a hero in the eyes of many Venezuelans, particularly poorer ones. Following a second failed coup in November 1992,

the imprisoned Chávez changed course, opting to pursue power via elections. He would need help.

Although ex-president Caldera was a well-regarded elder statesman, his political career was waning in 1992. Four years earlier, he had failed to secure his party's presidential nomination, and he was now considered a political relic. But the seventy-six-year-old senator still dreamed of returning to the presidency, and Chávez's emergence provided him with a lifeline. On the night of Chávez's initial coup, the former president stood up during an emergency joint session of congress and embraced the rebels' cause, declaring:

It is difficult to ask the people to sacrifice themselves for freedom and democracy when they think that freedom and democracy are incapable of giving them food to eat, of preventing the astronomical rise in the cost of subsistence, or of placing a definitive end to the terrible scourge of corruption that, in the eyes of the entire world, is eating away at the institutions of Venezuela with each passing day.

The stunning speech resurrected Caldera's political career. Having tapped into Chávez's antisystem constituency, the ex-president's public support swelled, which allowed him to make a successful presidential bid in 1993.

Caldera's public flirtation with Chávez did more than boost his own standing in the polls; it also gave Chávez new credibility. Chávez and his comrades had sought to destroy their country's thirty-four-year-old democracy. But rather than denouncing the coup leaders as an extremist threat, the former president offered them public sympathy—and, with it, an opening to mainstream politics.

Caldera also helped open the gates to the presidential palace for Chávez by dealing a mortal blow to Venezuela's established parties. In a stunning about-face, he abandoned COPEI, the party he had founded nearly half a century earlier, and launched an independent presidential bid. To be sure, the parties were already in crisis. But Caldera's departure and subsequent anti-establishment campaign helped bury them. The party system collapsed after Caldera's 1993 election as an antiparty independent, paving the way for future outsiders. Five years later, it would be Chávez's turn.

But back in 1993, Chávez still had a major problem. He was in jail, awaiting trial for treason. However, in 1994, now-President Caldera dropped all charges against him. Caldera's final act in enabling Chávez was literally opening the gates—of prison—for him. Immediately after Chávez's release, a reporter asked him where he was going. "To power," he replied. Freeing Chávez was popular, and Caldera had promised such a move during the campaign. Like most Venezuelan elites, he viewed Chávez as a passing fad—someone who would likely fall out of public favor by the time of the next election. But in dropping all charges, rather than allowing Chávez to stand trial and then pardoning him, Caldera elevated him, transforming the former coup leader overnight into a viable presidential candidate. On December 6, 1998, Chávez won the presidency, easily defeating an establishment-backed candidate. On inauguration day, Caldera, the outgoing president, could not bring himself to deliver the oath of office to Chávez, as tradition dictated. Instead, he stood glumly off to one side.

Despite their vast differences, Hitler, Mussolini, and Chávez followed routes to power that share striking similarities. Not only were they all outsiders with a flair for capturing public at-

ention, but each of them rose to power because establishment politicians overlooked the warning signs and either handed over power to them (Hitler and Mussolini) or opened the door for them (Chávez).

The abdication of political responsibility by existing leaders often marks a nation's first step toward authoritarianism. Years after Chávez's presidential victory, Rafael Caldera explained his mistakes simply: "Nobody thought that Mr. Chávez had even the remotest chance of becoming president." And merely a day after Hitler became chancellor, a prominent conservative who aided him admitted, "I have just committed the greatest stupidity of my life; I have allied myself with the greatest demagogue in world history."

Not all democracies have fallen into this trap. Some—including Belgium, Britain, Costa Rica, and Finland—have faced challenges from demagogues but also have managed to keep them out of power. How have they done it? It is tempting to think this survival is rooted in the collective wisdom of voters. Maybe Belgians and Costa Ricans were simply more democratic than their counterparts in Germany or Italy. After all, we like to believe that the fate of a government lies in the hands of its citizens. If the people hold democratic values, democracy will be safe. If citizens are open to authoritarian appeals, then, sooner or later, democracy will be in trouble.

This view is wrong. It assumes too much of democracy—that "the people" can shape at will the kind of government they possess. It's hard to find any evidence of majority support for authoritarianism in 1920s Germany and Italy. Before the Nazis and Fascists seized power, less than 2 percent of the population

were party members, and neither party achieved anything close to a majority of the vote in free and fair elections. Rather, solid electoral majorities opposed Hitler and Mussolini—before both men achieved power with the support of political insiders blind to the danger of their own ambitions.

Hugo Chávez was elected by a majority of voters, but there is little evidence that Venezuelans were looking for a strongman. At the time, public support for democracy was higher there than in Chile—a country that was, and remains, stably democratic. According to the 1998 Latinobarómetro survey, 60 percent of Venezuelans agreed with the statement “Democracy is always the best form of government,” while only 25 percent agreed that “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one.” By contrast, only 53 percent of respondents in Chile agreed that “democracy is always the best form of government.”

Potential demagogues exist in all democracies, and occasionally, one or more of them strike a public chord. But in some democracies, political leaders heed the warning signs and take steps to ensure that authoritarians remain on the fringes, far from the centers of power. When faced with the rise of extremists or demagogues, they make a concerted effort to isolate and defeat them. Although mass responses to extremist appeals matter, what matters more is whether political elites, and especially parties, serve as filters. Put simply, political parties are democracy’s gatekeepers.

If authoritarians are to be kept out, they first have to be identified. There is, alas, no foolproof advance warning system. Many authoritarians can be easily recognized before they come to

power. They have a clear track record: Hitler led a failed putsch; Chávez led a failed military uprising; Mussolini’s Blackshirts engaged in paramilitary violence; and in Argentina in the mid-twentieth century, Juan Perón helped lead a successful coup two and a half years before running for president.

But politicians do not always reveal the full scale of their authoritarianism before reaching power. Some adhere to democratic norms early in their careers, only to abandon them later. Consider Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Orbán and his Fidesz party began as liberal democrats in the late 1980s, and in his first stint as prime minister between 1998 and 2002, Orbán governed democratically. His autocratic about-face after returning to power in 2010 was a genuine surprise.

So how do we identify authoritarianism in politicians who don’t have an obvious antidemocratic record? Here we turn to the eminent political scientist Juan Linz. Born in Weimar Germany and raised amid Spain’s civil war, Linz knew all too well the perils of losing a democracy. As a professor at Yale, he devoted much of his career to trying to understand how and why democracies die. Many of Linz’s conclusions can be found in a small but seminal book called *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*. Published in 1978, the book highlights the role of politicians, showing how their behavior can either reinforce democracy or put it at risk. He also proposed, but never fully developed, a “litmus test” for identifying antidemocratic politicians.

Building on Linz’s work, we have developed a set of four behavioral warning signs that can help us know an authoritarian when we see one. We should worry when a politician 1) rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, 2) denies the legitimacy of opponents, 3) tolerates or encourages violence,

or 4) indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media. Table 1 shows how to assess politicians in terms of these four factors.

A politician who meets even one of these criteria is cause for concern. What kinds of candidates tend to test positive on a litmus test for authoritarianism? Very often, populist outsiders do. Populists are antiestablishment politicians—figures who, claiming to represent the voice of “the people,” wage war on what they depict as a corrupt and conspiratorial elite. Populists tend to deny the legitimacy of established parties, attacking them as undemocratic and even unpatriotic. They tell voters that the existing system is not really a democracy but instead has been hijacked, corrupted, or rigged by the elite. And they promise to bury that elite and return power to “the people.” This discourse should be taken seriously. When populists win elections, they often assault democratic institutions. In Latin America, for example, of all fifteen presidents elected in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela between 1990 and 2012, five were populist outsiders: Alberto Fujimori, Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Lucio Gutiérrez, and Rafael Correa. All five ended up weakening democratic institutions.

Table 1: Four Key Indicators of Authoritarian Behavior

<p>1. Rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game</p>	<p>Do they reject the Constitution or express a willingness to violate it?</p> <p>Do they suggest a need for antidemocratic measures, such as canceling elections, violating or suspending the Constitution, banning certain organizations, or restricting basic civil or political rights?</p> <p>Do they seek to use (or endorse the use of) extraconstitutional means to change the government, such as military coups, violent insurrections, or mass protests aimed at forcing a change in the government?</p> <p>Do they attempt to undermine the legitimacy of elections, for example, by refusing to accept credible electoral results?</p>
<p>2. Denial of the legitimacy of political opponents</p>	<p>Do they describe their rivals as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order?</p> <p>Do they claim that their rivals constitute an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life?</p> <p>Do they baselessly describe their partisan rivals as criminals, whose supposed violation of the law (or potential to do so) disqualifies them from full participation in the political arena?</p> <p>Do they baselessly suggest that their rivals are foreign agents, in that they are secretly working in alliance with (or the employ of) a foreign government—usually an enemy one?</p>

<p>3. Toleration or encouragement of violence</p>	<p>Do they have any ties to armed gangs, paramilitary forces, militias, guerrillas, or other organizations that engage in illicit violence?</p> <p>Have they or their partisan allies sponsored or encouraged mob attacks on opponents?</p> <p>Have they tacitly endorsed violence by their supporters by refusing to unambiguously condemn it and punish it?</p> <p>Have they praised (or refused to condemn) other significant acts of political violence, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?</p>
<p>4. Readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media</p>	<p>Have they supported laws or policies that restrict civil liberties, such as expanded libel or defamation laws, or laws restricting protest, criticism of the government, or certain civic or political organizations?</p> <p>Have they threatened to take legal or other punitive action against critics in rival parties, civil society, or the media?</p> <p>Have they praised repressive measures taken by other governments, either in the past or elsewhere in the world?</p>

Keeping authoritarian politicians out of power is more easily said than done. Democracies, after all, are not supposed to ban parties or prohibit candidates from standing for election—and we do not advocate such measures. The responsibility for filtering out authoritarians lies, rather, with political parties and party leaders: democracy's gatekeepers.

Successful gatekeeping requires that mainstream parties isolate and defeat extremist forces, a behavior political scientist Nancy Bermeo calls "distancing." Prodemocratic parties may engage in distancing in several ways. First, they can keep

would-be authoritarians off party ballots at election time. This requires that they resist the temptation to nominate these extremists for higher office even when they can potentially deliver votes.

Second, parties can root out extremists in the grass roots of their own ranks. Take the Swedish Conservative Party (AVF) during the perilous interwar period. The AVF's youth group (an organization of voting-age activists), called the Swedish Nationalist Youth Organization, grew increasingly radical in the early 1930s, criticizing parliamentary democracy, openly supporting Hitler, and even creating a group of uniformed storm troopers. The AVF responded in 1933 by expelling the organization. The loss of 25,000 members may have cost the AVF votes in the 1934 municipal elections, but the party's distancing strategy reduced the influence of antidemocratic forces in Sweden's largest center-right party.

Third, prodemocratic parties can avoid all alliances with antidemocratic parties and candidates. As we saw in Italy and Germany, prodemocratic parties are sometimes tempted to align with extremists on their ideological flank to win votes or, in parliamentary systems, form governments. But such alliances can have devastating long-term consequences. As Linz wrote, the demise of many democracies can be traced to a party's "greater affinity for extremists on its side of the political spectrum than for [mainstream] parties close to the opposite side."

Fourth, prodemocratic parties can act to systematically isolate, rather than legitimize, extremists. This requires that politicians avoid acts—such as German Conservatives' joint rallies with Hitler in the early 1930s or Caldera's speech sympathizing with Chávez—that help to "normalize" or provide public respectability to authoritarian figures.

Finally, whenever extremists emerge as serious electoral contenders, mainstream parties must forge a united front to defeat them. To quote Linz, they must be willing to “join with opponents ideologically distant but committed to the survival of the democratic political order.” In normal circumstances, this is almost unimaginable. Picture Senator Edward Kennedy and other liberal Democrats campaigning for Ronald Reagan, or the British Labour Party and their trade union allies endorsing Margaret Thatcher. Each party’s followers would be infuriated at this seeming betrayal of principles. But in extraordinary times, courageous party leadership means putting democracy and country before party and articulating to voters what is at stake. When a party or politician that tests positive on our litmus test emerges as a serious electoral threat, there is little alternative. United democratic fronts can prevent extremists from winning power, which can mean saving a democracy.

Although the failures are more memorable, some European democracies practiced successful gatekeeping between the wars. Surprisingly big lessons can be drawn from small countries. Consider Belgium and Finland. In Europe’s years of political and economic crisis in the 1920s and 1930s, both countries experienced an early warning sign of democratic decay—the rise of antisystem extremists—but, unlike Italy and Germany, they were saved by political elites who defended democratic institutions (at least until Nazi invasion several years later).

During Belgium’s 1936 general election, as the contagion of fascism was spreading from Italy and Germany across Europe, voters delivered a jarring result. Two authoritarian far-right parties—the Rex Party and the Flemish nationalist party,

or Vlaams Nationaal Verbond (VNV)—surged in the polls, capturing almost 20 percent of the popular vote and challenging the historical dominance of three establishment parties: the center-right Catholic Party, the Socialists, and the Liberal Party. The challenge from the leader of the Rex Party, Léon Degrelle, a Catholic journalist who would become a Nazi collaborator, was especially strong. Degrelle, a virulent critic of parliamentary democracy, had departed from the right edges of the Catholic Party and now attacked its leaders as corrupt. He received encouragement and financial support from both Hitler and Mussolini.

The 1936 election shook the centrist parties, which suffered losses across the board. Aware of the antidemocratic movements in nearby Italy and Germany and fearful for their own survival, they confronted the daunting task of deciding how to respond. The Catholic Party, in particular, faced a difficult dilemma: collaborate with their longtime rivals, the Socialists and Liberals, or forge a right-wing alliance that included the Rexists, a party with whom they shared some ideological affinity but that rejected the value of democratic politics.

Unlike the retreating mainstream politicians of Italy and Germany, the Belgian Catholic leadership declared that any cooperation with the Rexists was incompatible with party membership and then pursued a two-pronged strategy to combat the movement. Internally, Catholic Party leaders heightened discipline by screening candidates for pro-Rexist sympathies and expelling those who expressed extremist views. In addition, the party leadership took a strong stance against cooperation with the far right. Externally, the Catholic Party fought Rex on its own turf. The Catholic Party adopted new propaganda and campaign tactics that targeted younger Catholics, who had formerly been part of the Rexist base. They created the Catholic

Youth Front in December 1935 and began to run former allies against Degrelle.

The final clash between Rex and the Catholic Party, in which Rex was effectively sidelined (until the Nazi occupation), centered around the formation of a new government after the 1936 election. The Catholic Party supported the incumbent Catholic prime minister Paul van Zeeland. After van Zeeland regained the premiership, there were two chief options for forming a government: The first was an alliance with the rival Socialists, along the lines of France's "Popular Front," which van Zeeland and other Catholic leaders had initially hoped to avoid. The second was a right-wing alliance of antisocialist forces that would include Rex and VNV. The choice was not easy; the second option was supported by a traditionalist faction that sought to upset the fragile van Zeeland cabinet by rallying the Catholic rank and file, organizing a "March on Brussels," and forcing a by-election in which Rex leader Degrelle would run against van Zeeland. These plans were thwarted in 1937 when Degrelle lost the by-election, largely because the Catholic Party MPs had taken a stand: They refused to go with the traditionalists' plan and instead united with the Liberals and Socialists behind van Zeeland. This was the Catholic Party's most important gatekeeping act.

The Catholic Party's stand on the right was also made possible by King Leopold III and the Socialist Party. The election of 1936 had left the Socialist Party as the largest party in the legislature, which gave it the prerogative to form a government. However, when it became evident that the Socialists could not gain enough parliamentary support, rather than call a new election—which may have handed even more seats to extremist parties—the king met with leaders of the largest parties to talk

them into a power-sharing cabinet, led by incumbent prime minister van Zeeland, which would include both the conservative Catholics and the Socialists but exclude antisystem parties on both sides. Although the Socialists distrusted van Zeeland, a Catholic Party man, they nevertheless put democracy ahead of their own interests and endorsed the grand coalition.

A similar dynamic unfolded in Finland, where the extreme-right Lapua Movement burst onto the political stage in 1929, threatening the country's fragile democracy. The movement sought the destruction of communism by any means necessary. It threatened violence if its demands were not met and attacked mainstream politicians whom it deemed collaborators with Socialists. At first, politicians from the governing center-right Agrarian Union flirted with the Lapua Movement, finding its anticommunism politically useful; they met the movement's demands to deny communist political rights while tolerating extreme-right violence. In 1930, P. E. Svinhufvud, a conservative whom the Lapua leaders considered "one of their own," became prime minister, and he offered them two cabinet posts. A year later, Svinhufvud became president. Yet the Lapua Movement continued its extremist behavior; with the communists banned, it targeted the more moderate Social Democratic Party. Lapua thugs abducted more than a thousand Social Democrats, including union leaders and members of parliament. The Lapua Movement also organized a 12,000-person march on Helsinki (modeled on the mythical March on Rome), and in 1932, it backed a failed putsch aimed at replacing the government with one that was "apolitical" and "patriotic."

As the Lapua Movement grew more radical, however, Finland's traditional conservative parties broke decisively with it. In late 1930, the bulk of the Agrarian Union, the liberal

Progress Party, and much of the Swedish People's Party joined their main ideological rival, the Social Democrats, in the so-called Lawfulness Front to defend democracy against violent extremists. Even the conservative president, Svinhufvud, forcefully rejected—and eventually banned—his former allies. The Lapua Movement was left isolated, and Finland's brief burst of fascism was aborted.

It is not only in distant historical cases that one finds successful gatekeeping. In Austria in 2016, the main center-right party (the Austrian People's Party, ÖVP) effectively kept the radical-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) out of the presidency. Austria has a long history of extreme right politics, and the FPÖ is one of Europe's strongest far-right parties. Austria's political system was growing vulnerable because the two main parties, the Social Democratic SPÖ and the Christian Democratic ÖVP, which had alternated in the presidency throughout the postwar period, were weakening. In 2016, their dominance was challenged by two upstarts—the Green Party's former chairman, Alexander Van der Bellen, and the extremist FPÖ leader Norbert Hofer.

To the surprise of most analysts, the first round left Van der Bellen and the right-wing outsider Hofer as the two candidates in a second-round runoff. After a procedural error in October 2016, the runoff was held in December. At this point, several leading politicians, including some from the conservative ÖVP, argued that Hofer and his Freedom Party had to be defeated. Hofer had appeared to encourage violence against immigrants, and many questioned whether an elected Hofer would privilege his party in ways that violated long-standing norms of the president remaining above politics. In the face of this threat, some important ÖVP leaders worked to defeat Hofer by supporting their ideological rival, the left-leaning Green

candidate, Van der Bellen. The ÖVP's presidential candidate, Andreas Khol, endorsed Van der Bellen, as did Chairman Reinhold Mitterlehner, Cabinet Minister Sophie Karmasin, and dozens of ÖVP mayors in the Austrian countryside. In one letter, former chairman Erhard Busek wrote that he endorsed Van der Bellen "not with passion but after careful deliberation," and that, furthermore, the decision was motivated by the sentiment that "we don't want congratulations from Le Pen, Jobbik, Wilders and the AfD [and other extremists] after our presidential elections." Van der Bellen won by a mere 300,000 votes.

This stance took considerable political courage. According to one Catholic Party mayor of a small city outside Vienna, Stefan Schmuckenschlager, who endorsed the Green Party candidate, it was a decision that split families. His twin brother, another party leader, had supported Hofer. As Schmuckenschlager explained it, power politics sometimes has to be put aside to do the right thing.

Did the endorsements from the ÖVP help? There is evidence that they did. According to exit polls, 55 percent of respondents who identified as ÖVP supporters said they voted for Van der Bellen, and 48 percent of Van der Bellen voters said they had voted for him to prevent Hofer from winning. In addition, the strong urban/rural division that has always marked Austrian politics (between left-wing urban areas and right-wing rural areas) was dramatically diminished in the second round in December 2016, with a surprising number of traditional rural conservative states switching to vote for Van der Bellen.

In short, in 2016, responsible leaders in the ÖVP resisted the temptation to ally with an extremist party on their own ideological flank, and the result was that party's defeat. The FPÖ's strong performance in the 2017 parliamentary elections, which positioned it to become a junior partner in a new right-wing

government, made it clear that the dilemma facing Austrian conservatives persists. Still, their effort to keep an extremist out of the presidency provides a useful model of contemporary gatekeeping.

For its part, the United States has an impressive record of gatekeeping. Both Democrats and Republicans have confronted extremist figures on their fringes, some of whom enjoyed considerable public support. For decades, both parties succeeded in keeping these figures out of the mainstream. Until, of course, 2016.

2

Gatekeeping in America

In *The Plot Against America*, American novelist Philip Roth builds on real historical events to imagine what fascism might have looked like in prewar America.

An early American mass-media hero, Charles Lindbergh, is the novel's central figure: He skyrockets to fame with his 1927 solo flight across the Atlantic and later becomes a vocal isolationist and Nazi sympathizer. But here is where history takes a fantastic turn in Roth's hands: Rather than fading into obscurity, Lindbergh arrives by plane at the 1940 Republican Party convention in Philadelphia at 3:14 A.M., as a packed hall finds itself deadlocked on the twentieth ballot. Cries of "Lindy! Lindy! Lindy!" erupt for thirty uncontained minutes on the convention floor, and in a moment of intense collective fervor, his name is proposed, seconded, and approved by acclamation as the party's nominee for president. Lindbergh, a man with no political experience but unparalleled media savvy, ignores the advice of his advisors and campaigns by piloting his iconic solo aircraft, *Spirit of St. Louis*, from state to state, wearing his flight goggles, high boots, and jumpsuit.

Trump's First Year: An Authoritarian Report Card

Donald Trump's first year in office followed a familiar script. Like Alberto Fujimori, Hugo Chávez, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, America's new president began his tenure by launching blistering rhetorical attacks on his opponents. He called the media the "enemy of the American people," questioned judges' legitimacy, and threatened to cut federal funding to major cities. Predictably, these attacks triggered dismay, shock, and anger across the political spectrum. Journalists found themselves at the front lines, exposing—but also provoking—the president's norm-breaking behavior. A study by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy found that the major news outlets were "unsparing" in their coverage of the Trump administration's first hundred days. Of news reports with a clear tone, the study found, 80 percent were negative—much higher than under Clinton (60 percent), George W. Bush (57 percent), and Obama (41 percent).

Soon, Trump administration officials were feeling besieged. Not a single week went by in which press coverage wasn't at least 70 percent negative. And amid swirling rumors about the Trump campaign's ties to Russia, a high-profile special counsel,

Robert Mueller, was appointed to oversee investigations into the case. Just a few months into his presidency, President Trump faced talk of impeachment. But he retained the support of his base, and like other elected demagogues, he doubled down. He claimed his administration was beset by powerful establishment forces, telling graduates of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy that "no politician in history, and I say this with great surety, has been treated worse or more unfairly." The question, then, was how Trump would respond. Would an outsider president who considered himself to be under unwarranted assault lash out, as happened in Peru and Turkey?

President Trump exhibited clear authoritarian instincts during his first year in office. In Chapter 4, we presented three strategies by which elected authoritarians seek to consolidate power: capturing the referees, sidelining the key players, and rewriting the rules to tilt the playing field against opponents. Trump attempted *all three* of these strategies.

President Trump demonstrated striking hostility toward the referees—law enforcement, intelligence, ethics agencies, and the courts. Soon after his inauguration, he sought to ensure that the heads of U.S. intelligence agencies, including the FBI, the CIA, and the National Security Agency, would be personally loyal to him, apparently in the hope of using these agencies as a shield against investigations into his campaign's Russia ties. During his first week in office, President Trump summoned FBI Director James Comey to a one-on-one dinner in the White House in which, according to Comey, the president asked for a pledge of loyalty. He later reportedly pressured Comey to drop investigations into his recently departed national security

director, Michael Flynn, pressed Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats and CIA Director Mike Pompeo to intervene in Comey's investigation, and personally appealed to Coats and NSA head Michael Rogers to release statements denying the existence of any collusion with Russia (both refused).

President Trump also tried to punish or purge agencies that acted with independence. Most prominently, he dismissed Comey after it became clear that Comey could not be pressured into protecting the administration and was expanding its Russia investigation. Only once in the FBI's eighty-two-year history had a president fired the bureau's director before his ten-year term was up—and in that case, the move was in response to clear ethical violations and enjoyed bipartisan support.

The Comey firing was not President Trump's only assault on referees who refused to come to his personal defense. Trump had attempted to establish a personal relationship with Manhattan-based U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara, whose investigations into money laundering reportedly threatened to reach Trump's inner circle; when Bharara, a respected anticorruption figure, continued the investigation, the president removed him. After Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself from the Russia investigation and his deputy, Rod Rosenstein, appointed the respected former FBI Director Robert Mueller as special counsel to oversee the investigation, Trump publicly shamed Sessions, reportedly seeking his resignation. White House lawyers even launched an effort to dig up dirt on Mueller, seeking conflicts of interest that could be used to discredit or dismiss him. By late 2017, many of Trump's allies were openly calling on him to fire Mueller, and there was widespread concern that he would soon do so.

President Trump's efforts to derail independent investigations evoked the kind of assaults on the referees routinely seen in less

democratic countries—for example, the dismissal of Venezuelan Prosecutor General Luisa Ortega, a *chavista* appointee who asserted her independence and began to investigate corruption and abuse in the Maduro government. Although Ortega's term did not expire until 2021 and she could be legally removed only by the legislature (which was in opposition hands), the government's dubiously elected Constituent Assembly sacked her in August 2017.

President Trump also attacked judges who ruled against him. After Judge James Robart of the Ninth Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals blocked the administration's initial travel ban, Trump spoke of "the opinion of this so-called judge, which essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country." Two months later, when the same court temporarily blocked the withholding of federal funds from sanctuary cities, the White House denounced the judgment as an attack on the rule of law by an "unelected judge." Trump himself responded by threatening to break up the Ninth Circuit.

The president took an indirect swipe at the judiciary in August 2017 when he pardoned the controversial former Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was convicted of violating a federal court order to stop racial profiling. Arpaio was a political ally and a hero to many of Trump's anti-immigrant supporters. As we noted earlier, the chief executive's constitutional power to pardon is without limit, but presidents have historically exercised it with great restraint, seeking advice from the Justice Department and never issuing pardons for self-protection or political gain. President Trump boldly violated these norms. Not only did he not consult the Justice Department, but the pardon was clearly political—it was popular with his base. The move reinforced fears that the president would eventually pardon himself and his inner circle—something that was reportedly explored by his lawyers.

Such a move would constitute an unprecedented attack on judicial independence. As constitutional scholar Martin Redish put it, “If the president can immunize his agents in this manner, the courts will effectively lose any meaningful authority to protect constitutional rights against invasion by the executive branch.”

The Trump administration also trampled, inevitably, on the Office of Government Ethics (OGE), an independent watchdog agency that, though lacking legal teeth, had been respected by previous administrations. Faced with the numerous conflicts of interest created by Trump’s business dealings, OGE director Walter Shaub repeatedly criticized the president-elect during the transition. The administration responded by launching attacks on the OGE. House Oversight Chair Jason Chaffetz, a Trump ally, even hinted at an investigation of Shaub. In May, administration officials tried to force the OGE to halt investigations into the White House’s appointment of ex-lobbyists. Alternately harassed and ignored by the White House, Shaub resigned, leaving behind what journalist Ryan Lizza called a “broken” OGE.

President Trump’s behavior toward the courts, law enforcement and intelligence bodies, and other independent agencies was drawn from an authoritarian playbook. He openly spoke of using the Justice Department and the FBI to go after Democrats, including Hillary Clinton. And in late 2017, the Justice Department considered nominating a special counsel to investigate Clinton. Despite its purges and threats, however, the administration could not capture the referees. Trump did not replace Comey with a loyalist, largely because such a move was vetoed by key Senate Republicans. Likewise, Senate Republicans resisted Trump’s efforts to replace Attorney General Sessions. But the president had other battles to wage.

The Trump administration also mounted efforts to sideline key players in the political system. President Trump’s rhetorical attacks on critics in the media are an example. His repeated accusations that outlets such as the *New York Times* and CNN were dispensing “fake news” and conspiring against him look familiar to any student of authoritarianism. In a February 2017 tweet, he called the media the “enemy of the American people,” a term that, critics noted, mimicked one used by Stalin and Mao. Trump’s rhetoric was often threatening. A few days after his “enemy of the people” tweet, Trump told the Conservative Political Action Committee:

I love the First Amendment; nobody loves it better than me. Nobody. . . . But as you saw throughout the entire campaign, and even now, the fake news doesn’t tell the truth. . . . I say it doesn’t represent the people. It never will represent the people, and we’re going to do something about it.

Do what, exactly? The following month, President Trump returned to his campaign pledge to “open up the libel laws,” tweeting that the *New York Times* had “disgraced the media world. Gotten me wrong for two solid years. Change libel laws?” When asked by a reporter whether the administration was really considering such changes, White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus said, “I think that’s something we’ve looked at.” Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa used this approach. His multimillion-dollar defamation suits and jailing of journalists on charges of defamation had a powerfully chilling effect on the media. Although Trump dropped the libel issue, he continued his threats. In July, he retweeted an altered video clip made from old WWE footage of him tackling and

then punching someone with a CNN logo superimposed on his face.

President Trump also considered using government regulatory agencies against unfriendly media companies. During the 2016 campaign, he had threatened Jeff Bezos, the owner of the *Washington Post* and Amazon, with antitrust action, tweeting: "If I become president, oh do they have problems." He also threatened to block the pending merger of Time Warner (CNN's parent company) and AT&T, and during the first months of his presidency, there were reports that White House advisors considered using the administration's antitrust authority as a source of leverage against CNN. And finally, in October 2017, Trump attacked NBC and other networks by threatening to "challenge their license."

There was one area in which the Trump administration went beyond threats to try to use the machinery of government to punish critics. During his first week in office, President Trump signed an executive order authorizing federal agencies to withhold funding from "sanctuary cities" that refused to cooperate with the administration's crackdown on undocumented immigrants. "If we have to," he declared in February 2017, "we'll defund." The plan was reminiscent of the Chávez government's repeated moves to strip opposition-run city governments of their control over local hospitals, police forces, ports, and other infrastructure. Unlike the Venezuelan president, however, President Trump was blocked by the courts.

Although President Trump has waged a war of words against the media and other critics, those words have not (yet) led to action. No journalists have been arrested, and no media outlets

have altered their coverage due to pressure from the government. Trump's efforts to tilt the playing field to his advantage have been more worrying. In May 2017, he called for changes in what he called "archaic" Senate rules, including the elimination of the filibuster, which would have strengthened the Republican majority at the expense of the Democratic minority. Senate Republicans did eliminate the filibuster for Supreme Court nominations, clearing the way for Neil Gorsuch's ascent to the Court, but they rejected the idea of doing away with it entirely.

Perhaps the most antidemocratic initiative yet undertaken by the Trump administration is the creation of the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, chaired by Vice President Mike Pence but run by Vice Chair Kris Kobach. To understand its potential impact, recall that the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts prompted a massive shift in party identification: The Democratic Party became the primary representative of minority and first- and second-generation immigrant voters, while GOP voters remained overwhelmingly white. Because the minority share of the electorate is growing, these changes favor the Democrats, a perception that was reinforced by Barack Obama's 2008 victory, in which minority turnout rates were unusually high.

Perceiving a threat, some Republican leaders came up with a response that evoked memories of the Jim Crow South: make it harder for low-income minority citizens to vote. Because poor minority voters were overwhelmingly Democratic, measures that dampened turnout among such voters would likely tilt the playing field in favor of Republicans. This would be done via strict voter identification laws—requiring, for example, that voters present a valid driver's license or other government-issued photo ID upon arrival at the polling station.

The push for voter ID laws was based on a false claim: that voter fraud is widespread in the United States. All reputable studies have concluded that levels of such fraud in this country are low. Yet Republicans began to push for measures to combat this nonexistent problem. The first two states to adopt voter ID laws were Georgia and Indiana, both in 2005. Georgia congressman John Lewis, a longtime civil rights leader, described his state's law as a "modern day poll tax." An estimated 300,000 Georgia voters lacked the required forms of ID, and African Americans were five times more likely than whites to lack them. Indiana's voter ID law, which Judge Terence Evans of the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals called "a not-too-thinly veiled attempt to discourage election day turnout by certain folks believed to skew Democratic," was taken to the Supreme Court, where it was upheld in 2008. After that, voter ID laws proliferated. Bills were introduced in thirty-seven states between 2010 and 2012, and by 2016 fifteen states had adopted such laws, although only ten had them in effect for the election.

The laws were passed exclusively in states where Republicans controlled both legislative chambers, and in all but Arkansas, the governor was also a Republican. There is little doubt that minority voters were a primary target. Voter ID laws are almost certain to have a disproportionate impact on low-income minority voters: According to one study, 37 percent of African Americans and 27 percent of Latinos reported not possessing a valid driver's license, compared to 16 percent of whites. A study by the Brennan Center for Justice estimated that 11 percent of American citizens (twenty-one million eligible voters) did not possess government-issued photo IDs, and that among African American citizens, the figure rose to 25 percent.

Of the eleven states with the highest black turnout in 2008,

seven adopted stricter voter ID laws, and of the twelve states that experienced the highest rates of Hispanic population growth between 2000 and 2010, nine passed laws making it harder to vote. Scholars have just begun to evaluate the impact of voter ID laws, and most studies have found only a modest effect on turnout. But a modest effect can be decisive in close elections, especially if the laws are widely adopted.

That is precisely what the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity hopes to make happen. The Commission's de facto head, Kris Kobach, has been described as America's "premier advocate of vote suppression." As Kansas's secretary of state, Kobach helped push through one of the nation's strictest voter ID laws. For Kobach, Donald Trump was a useful ally. During the 2016 campaign, Trump had complained that the election was "rigged," and afterward, he made the extraordinary claim that he had "won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally." He repeated this point in a meeting with congressional leaders, saying that there had been between three and five million illegal votes. The claim was baseless: A national vote-monitoring project led by the media organization ProPublica found no evidence of fraud. *Washington Post* reporter Philip Bump scoured Nexis for documented cases of fraud in 2016 and found a total of four.

But President Trump's apparent obsession with having "won" the popular vote converged with Kobach's goals. Kobach endorsed Trump's claims, declaring that he was "absolutely correct" in asserting that the number of illegal votes exceeded Clinton's margin of victory. (Kobach later said that "we will probably never know" who won the popular vote.) Kobach gained Trump's ear, helped convince him to create the Commission, and was appointed to run it.

The Commission's early activities suggested that its objective was voter suppression. First, it is collecting stories of fraud from across the country, which could provide political ammunition for state-level voter-restriction initiatives or, perhaps, for efforts to repeal the 1993 "Motor Voter" law, which eased the process of voter registration across the United States. In effect, the Commission is poised to serve as a high-profile national mouthpiece for Republican efforts to pass tougher voter ID laws. Second, the Commission aims to encourage or facilitate state-level voter roll purges, which, existing research suggests, would invariably remove many legitimate voters. The Commission has already sought to cross-check local voter records to uncover cases of double registration, in which people are registered in more than one state. There are also reports that the Commission plans to use a Homeland Security database of green card and visa holders to scour the voter rolls for noncitizens. The risk, as one study shows, is that the number of mistakes—because of the existence of many people with the same name and birthdate—will vastly exceed the number of illegal registrations that are uncovered.

Efforts to discourage voting are fundamentally antidemocratic, and they have a particularly deplorable history in the United States. Although contemporary voter-restriction efforts are nowhere near as far-reaching as those undertaken by southern Democrats in the late nineteenth century, they are nevertheless significant. Because strict voter ID laws disproportionately affect low-income minority voters, who are overwhelmingly Democratic, they skew elections in favor of the GOP.

Trump's Commission on Election Integrity did not carry out any concrete reforms in 2017, and its clumsy request for voter information was widely rebuffed by the states. But if the Commission proceeds with its project unchecked, it has the potential to inflict real damage on our country's electoral process.

In many ways, President Trump followed the electoral authoritarian script during his first year. He made efforts to capture the referees, sideline the key players who might halt him, and tilt the playing field. But the president has talked more than he has acted, and his most notorious threats have not been realized. Troubling antidemocratic initiatives, including packing the FBI with loyalists and blocking the Mueller investigation, were derailed by Republican opposition and his own bumbling. One important initiative, the Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, is just getting off the ground, so its impact is harder to evaluate. Overall, then, President Trump repeatedly scraped up against the guardrails, like a reckless driver, but he did not break through them. Despite clear causes for concern, little actual backsliding occurred in 2017. We did not cross the line into authoritarianism.

It is still early, however. The backsliding of democracy is often gradual, its effects unfolding slowly over time. Comparing Trump's first year in office to those of other would-be authoritarians, the picture is mixed. Table 3 offers an illustrative list of nine countries in which potentially authoritarian leaders came to power via elections. In some countries, including Ecuador and Russia, backsliding was evident during the first year. By contrast, in Peru under Fujimori and Turkey under Erdoğan, there was no initial backsliding. Fujimori engaged in heated rhetorical battles during his first year as president but did not assault democratic institutions until nearly two years in. Breakdown took even longer in Turkey.

Table 3: The Authoritarian Report Card After One Year

Country	Leader	Start Date	Capturing Referees	Sidelining Players	Changing Rules	Eventual Fate of Regime
Argentina	Juan Perón	June 1946	YES	NO	NO	Authoritarian
Ecuador	Rafael Correa	January 2007	YES	YES	YES	Mildly authoritarian
Hungary	Viktor Orbán	May 2010	LIMITED	NO	NO	Mildly authoritarian
Italy	Silvio Berlusconi	June 2001	NO	NO	NO	Democratic
Peru	Alberto Fujimori	July 1990	NO	NO	NO	Authoritarian
Peru	Ollanta Humala	July 2011	NO	NO	NO	Democratic
Poland	Jaroslav Kaczyński	November 2015	YES	NO	NO	Mildly authoritarian
Russia	Vladimir Putin	May 2000	NO	YES	NO	Highly authoritarian
Turkey	Recep Erdoğan	March 2003	NO	NO	NO	Authoritarian
Venezuela	Hugo Chávez	February 1999	YES	YES	YES	Authoritarian

Democracy's fate during the remainder of Trump's presidency will depend on several factors. The first is the behavior of Republican leaders. Democratic institutions depend crucially on the willingness of governing parties to defend them—even against their own leaders. The failure of Roosevelt's court-packing scheme and the fall of Nixon were made possible, in part, when key members of the president's own party—Democrats in Roosevelt's case and Republicans in the case of Nixon—decided to stand up and oppose him. More recently, in Poland, the Law

and Justice Party government's efforts to dismantle checks and balances suffered a setback when President Andrzej Duda, a Law and Justice Party member, vetoed two bills that would have enabled the government to thoroughly purge and pack the supreme court. In Hungary, by contrast, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán faced little resistance from the governing Fidesz party as he made his authoritarian push.

The relationship between Donald Trump and his party is equally important, especially given the Republicans' control over both houses of Congress. Republican leaders could choose to remain loyal. Active loyalists do not merely support the president but publicly defend even his most controversial moves. Passive loyalists retreat from public view when scandals erupt but still vote with the president. Critical loyalists try, in a sense, to have it both ways: They may publicly distance themselves from the president's worst behavior, but they do not take any action (for example, voting in Congress) that will weaken, much less bring down, the president. In the face of presidential abuse, any of these responses will enable authoritarianism.

A second approach is containment. Republicans who adopt this strategy may back the president on many issues, from judicial appointments to tax and health care reform, but draw a line at behavior they consider dangerous. This can be a difficult stance to maintain. As members of the same party, they stand to benefit if the president succeeds—yet they realize that the president could inflict real damage on our institutions in the long term. They work with the president wherever possible while at the same time taking steps to ensure that he does not abuse power, allowing the president to remain in office but, they would hope, constraining him.

Finally, in principle, congressional leaders could seek the president's removal. This would be politically costly for them.

Not only does bringing down one's own president risk accusations of treason from fellow partisans (imagine, for example, the responses of Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh), but it also risks derailing the party's legislative agenda. It would hurt the party's short-term electoral prospects, as it did after Nixon's resignation. But if the threat coming from the presidency is severe enough (or if the president's behavior starts to hurt their own poll numbers), party leaders may deem it necessary to bring down one of their own.

During President Trump's first year in office, Republicans responded to presidential abuse with a mix of loyalty and containment. At first, loyalty predominated. But after the president fired James Comey in May 2017, some GOP senators moved toward containment, making it clear that they would not approve a Trump loyalist to succeed him. Republican senators also worked to ensure that an independent investigation into Russia's involvement in the 2016 election would go forward. A few of them pushed quietly for the Justice Department to name a special counsel, and many of them embraced Robert Mueller's appointment. When reports emerged that the White House was exploring ways of removing Mueller, and when some Trump loyalists called for Mueller's removal, important Republican senators, including Susan Collins, Bob Corker, Lindsey Graham, and John McCain, came out in opposition. And when President Trump leaned toward sacking Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who, having recused himself, could not fire Mueller, GOP senators jumped to Sessions's defense. Senate Judiciary Committee Chair Chuck Grassley said he would not schedule hearings for a replacement if Sessions was fired.

Although Senators Graham, McCain, and Corker hardly joined the opposition (each voted with Trump at least 85 percent of the time), they took important steps to contain the pres-

ident. No Republican leaders sought the president's removal in 2017, but as journalist Abigail Tracy put it, some of them appeared to have "found their own red line."

Another factor affecting the fate of our democracy is public opinion. If would-be authoritarians can't turn to the military or organize large-scale violence, they must find other means of persuading allies to go along and critics to back off or give up. Public support is a useful tool in this regard. When an elected leader enjoys, say, a 70 percent approval rating, critics jump on the bandwagon, media coverage softens, judges grow more reluctant to rule against the government, and even rival politicians, worried that strident opposition will leave them isolated, tend to keep their heads down. By contrast, when the government's approval rating is low, media and opposition grow more brazen, judges become emboldened to stand up to the president, and allies begin to dissent. Fujimori, Chávez, and Erdoğan all enjoyed massive popularity when they launched their assault on democratic institutions.

To understand how public support could affect the Trump presidency, ask yourself: What if America were like West Virginia? West Virginia is the most pro-Trump state in the union. According to a Gallup poll, President Trump's approval rating there averaged 60 percent in the first half of 2017, compared to 40 percent in favor of him nationwide. In the face of the president's popularity, opposition to him withered in West Virginia—even among Democrats. Democratic senator Joe Manchin voted with President Trump 54 percent of the time through August 2017, more than any other Democrat in the Senate. *The Hill* listed Manchin among Trump's "10 Biggest Allies in Congress." The state's Democratic governor, Jim Justice, went further: He switched parties. Embracing President Trump at a rally, Justice not only praised him as a "good man"

with “real ideas” but dismissed the Russia investigation, declaring: “Have we not heard enough about the Russians?” If Democrats across the country behaved as they did in West Virginia, President Trump would face little resistance—even on the issue of foreign interference in our election.

The higher President Trump’s approval rating, the more dangerous he is. His popularity will depend on the state of the economy, as well as on contingent events. Events that put the government’s incompetence on display, such as the Bush administration’s inept response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, can erode public support. But other developments, such as security threats, can boost it.

That brings us to a final factor shaping President Trump’s ability to damage our democracy: crisis. Major security crises—wars or large-scale terrorist attacks—are political game changers. Almost invariably, they increase support for the government. The last time the United States experienced a major security crisis, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, President Bush’s approval rating skyrocketed to 90 percent. Popularity tends to loosen the constraints on presidential power. Citizens become more likely to tolerate, and even endorse, authoritarian measures when they fear for their security. And it’s not only average citizens who respond this way. Judges are notoriously reluctant to block presidential power grabs in the midst of crises, when national security is perceived to be at risk. According to political scientist William Howell, institutional constraints on President Bush disappeared in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, allowing Bush to “do whatever he liked to define and respond to the crisis.”

Security crises are, therefore, moments of danger for democracy. Leaders who can “do whatever they like” can inflict great harm upon democratic institutions. As we have seen, that

is precisely what leaders such as Fujimori, Putin, and Erdoğan did. For a would-be authoritarian who feels unfairly besieged by opponents and shackled by democratic institutions, crisis opens up a window of opportunity.

In the United States, too, security crises have permitted executive power grabs, from Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus to Roosevelt’s internment of Japanese Americans to Bush’s USA PATRIOT Act. But there was an important difference. Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Bush were committed democrats, and at the end of the day, each of them exercised considerable forbearance in wielding the vast authority generated by crisis.

Donald Trump, by contrast, has rarely exhibited forbearance in any context. The chances of a conflict occurring on his watch are also considerable. They would be for any president—the United States fought land wars or suffered major terrorist attacks under six of its last twelve elected presidents. But given President Trump’s foreign policy ineptitude, the risks are especially high. We fear that if Trump were to confront a war or terrorist attack, he would exploit this crisis fully—using it to attack political opponents and restrict freedoms Americans take for granted. In our view, this scenario represents the greatest danger facing American democracy today.

Even if President Trump does not directly dismantle democratic institutions, his norm breaking is almost certain to corrode them. President Trump has, as David Brooks has written, “smashed through the behavior standards that once governed public life.” His party rewarded him for it by nominating him for president. In office, his continued norm violation has expanded the zone of acceptable presidential behavior, giving tactics that were once considered aberrant and inadmissible, such

as lying, and bullying, a prominent place in politicians' tool kits.

Presidential norm breaking is not inherently bad. Many violations are innocuous. In January 1977, Jimmy Carter surprised the police, the press, and the 250,000 Americans gathered to watch his inauguration when he and his wife *walked* the mile and a half from the Capitol to the White House. The *New York Daily News* described the Carter's decision to abandon the "closed and armored limousine" as an "unprecedented departure from custom." Ever since, it has become what the *New York Times* called "an informal custom" for the president-elect to at least step out of his protected limousine during the inaugural parade to show that he is "the people's president."

Norm breaking can also be democratizing: In the 1840 presidential election, William Henry Harrison broke tradition by going out and campaigning among voters. The previous norm had been for candidates to avoid campaigning, preserving a Cincinnatus-like fiction that they harbored no personal ambition for power—but limiting voters' ability to get to know them.

Or take another example: In 1901, a routine White House press release was issued on behalf of new president Theodore Roosevelt headlined, "Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee, Alabama, dined with the President last evening." While prominent black political leaders had visited the White House before, a dinner with a leading African American political figure was, as one historian has described it, a violation of "the prevailing social etiquette of white domination." The response was immediate and vicious. One newspaper described it as "the most damnable outrage which has ever been perpetrated by any citizen of the United States." Senator William Jennings Bryan commented, "It is hoped that both of them [Roosevelt and

Washington] will upon reflection, realize the wisdom of abandoning their purpose to wipe out race lines." In the face of the uproar, the White House's press operation first denied the event happened, later said it had "merely" been a lunch, and then defended it by saying that at least no women had been present.

Because societal values change over time, a degree of presidential norm breaking is inevitable—even desirable. But Donald Trump's norm violations in his first year of office differed fundamentally from those of his predecessors. For one, he was a serial norm breaker. Never has a president flouted so many unwritten rules so quickly. Many of the transgressions were trivial—President Trump broke a 150-year White House tradition by not having a pet. Others were more ominous. Trump's first inaugural address, for example, was darker than such addresses typically are (he spoke, for example, of "American carnage"), leading former President George W. Bush to observe: "That was some weird shit."

But where President Trump really stands out from his predecessors is in his willingness to challenge unwritten rules of greater consequence, including norms that are essential to the health of democracy. Among these are long-standing norms of separating private and public affairs, such as those governing nepotism. Existing legislation, which prohibits presidents from appointing family members to the cabinet or agency positions, does not include White House staff positions. So Trump's appointment of his daughter, Ivanka, and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to high-level advisory posts was technically legal—but it flouted the spirit of the law.

There were also norms regulating presidential conflicts of interest. Because presidents must not use public office for private enrichment, those who own businesses must separate themselves from these enterprises before they take office. Yet the laws

governing such separation are surprisingly lax. Government officials are not technically required to divest themselves of their holdings, but only to recuse themselves from decisions that affect their interests. It has become standard practice for government officials to simply divest themselves, however, to avoid even the appearance of a wrongdoing. President Trump exercised no such forbearance, despite his unprecedented conflicts of interest. He granted his sons control over his business holdings, in a move deemed vastly insufficient by government ethics officials. The Office of Government Ethics reported receiving 39,105 public complaints involving Trump administration conflicts of interest between October 1, 2016, and March 31, 2017, a massive increase over the same period in 2008–2009 (when President Obama took office), when just 733 complaints were recorded.

President Trump also violated core democratic norms when he openly challenged the legitimacy of elections. Although his claim of “millions” of illegal voters was rejected by fact checkers, repudiated by politicians from both parties, and dismissed as baseless by social scientists, the new president repeated it in public and in private. No major politician in more than a century had questioned the integrity of the American electoral process—not even Al Gore, who lost one of the closest elections in history at the hands of the Supreme Court.

False charges of fraud can undermine public confidence in elections—and when citizens do not trust the electoral process, they often lose faith in democracy itself. In Mexico, after the losing presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, insisted that the 2006 election was stolen from him, confidence in Mexico’s electoral system declined. A poll taken prior to the 2012 presidential election found that 71 percent of Mexicans

believed that fraud could be in play. In the United States, the figures were even more dramatic. In a survey carried out prior to the 2016 election, 84 percent of Republican voters said they believed a “meaningful amount” of fraud occurred in American elections, and nearly 60 percent of Republican voters said they believed illegal immigrants would “vote in meaningful amounts” in November. These doubts persisted after the election. According to a July 2017 Morning Consult/Politico poll, 47 percent of Republicans believed that Trump won the popular vote, compared to 40 percent who believed Hillary Clinton won. In other words, about half of self-identified Republicans said they believe that American elections are massively rigged. Such beliefs may be consequential. A survey conducted in June 2017 asked, “If Donald Trump were to say that the 2020 presidential election should be postponed until the country can make sure that only eligible American citizens can vote, would you support or oppose postponing the election?” Fifty-two percent of Republicans said they would support postponement.

President Trump also abandoned basic rules of political civility. He broke with norms of postelection reconciliation by continuing to attack Hillary Clinton. He also violated the unwritten rule that sitting presidents should not attack their predecessor. At 6:35 A.M. on March 4, 2017, President Trump tweeted, “Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my ‘wires tapped’ in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!” He followed up half an hour later with: “How low has President Obama gone to tapp [*sic*] my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!”

Perhaps President Trump’s most notorious norm-breaking

behavior has been lying. The idea that presidents should tell the truth in public is uncontroversial in American politics. As Republican consultant Whit Ayers likes to tell his clients, candidates seeking credibility must “never deny the undeniable” and “never lie.” Given this norm, politicians typically avoid lying by changing the topic of debate, reframing difficult questions, or only partly answering them. President Trump’s routine, brazen fabrications are unprecedented. His tendencies were manifest during the 2016 campaign. *PolitiFact* classified 69 percent of his public statements as “mostly false” (21 percent), “false” (33 percent), or “pants on fire” (15 percent). Only 17 percent were coded as “true” or “mostly true.”

Trump continued to lie as president. Tracing all the president’s public statements since taking office, the *New York Times* showed that even using a conservative metric—demonstrably false statements, as opposed to merely dubious ones—President Trump “achieved something remarkable”: He made at least one false or misleading public statement every single day of his first forty days in office. No lie is too obvious. President Trump claimed the largest Electoral College victory since Ronald Reagan (in fact, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and Obama all won by larger margins than he did); he claimed to have signed more bills in his first six months than any other president (he was well behind several presidents, including George H. W. Bush and Clinton). In July 2017, he bragged that the head of the Boy Scouts told him he had “made the greatest speech ever made to them,” only to have the claim disputed immediately by the Boy Scouts organization itself.

President Trump himself did not pay much of a price for his lies. In a political and media environment in which engaged citizens increasingly filter events through their own partisan lenses, his supporters did not come to view him as dishonest

during the first year of his presidency. For our political system, however, the consequences of his dishonesty are devastating. Citizens have a basic right to information in a democracy. Without credible information about what our elected leaders do, we cannot effectively exercise our right to vote. When the president of the United States lies to the public, our access to credible information is jeopardized, and trust in government is eroded (how could it *not* be?). When citizens do not believe their elected leaders, the foundations of representative democracy weaken. The value of elections is diminished when citizens have no faith in the leaders they elect.

Exacerbating this loss of faith is President Trump’s abandonment of basic norms of respect for the media. An independent press is a bulwark of democratic institutions; no democracy can live without it. Every American president since Washington has done battle with the media. Many of them privately despised it. But with few exceptions, U.S. presidents have recognized the media’s centrality as a democratic institution and respected its place in the political system. Even presidents who scorned the media in private treated it with a certain minimum of respect and civility in public. This basic norm gave rise to a host of unwritten rules governing the president’s relationship with the press. Some of these norms—such as waving to the press corps before boarding Air Force One—were superficial, but others, such as holding press conferences accessible to all members of the White House press corps, were more significant.

President Trump’s public insults of media outlets and even individual journalists were without precedent in modern U.S. history. He described the media as “among the most dishonest human beings on Earth,” and repeatedly accused such critical news outlets as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and CNN of lying or delivering “fake news.” Trump was not above

personal attacks. In June 2017, he went after television host Mika Brzezinski and her cohost Joe Scarborough in a uniquely vitriolic tweetstorm:

I heard poorly rated @Morning_Joe speaks badly of me (don't watch anymore). Then how come low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe, came . . .

. . . to Mar-a-Lago 3 nights in a row around New Year's Eve, and insisted on joining me. She was bleeding badly from a face-lift. I said no!

Even Richard Nixon, who privately viewed the media as “the enemy,” never made such public attacks. To find comparable behavior in this hemisphere one must look at Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela or Rafael Correa in Ecuador.

The Trump administration also broke established norms by selectively excluding reporters from press events. On February 24, 2017, Press Secretary Sean Spicer barred reporters from the *New York Times*, CNN, *Politico*, *BuzzFeed*, and the *Los Angeles Times* from attending an untelevised press “gaggle,” while handpicking journalists from smaller but sympathetic outlets such as the *Washington Times* and One America News Network to round out the pool. The only modern precedent for such a move was Nixon's decision to bar the *Washington Post* from the White House after it broke the Watergate scandal.

In 1993, New York's Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a former social scientist, made an incisive observation: Humans have a limited ability to cope with people behaving in

ways that depart from shared standards. When unwritten rules are violated over and over, Moynihan observed, societies have a tendency to “define deviancy down”—to shift the standard. What was once seen as abnormal becomes normal.

Moynihan applied this insight, controversially, to America's growing social tolerance for single-parent families, high murder rates, and mental illness. Today it can be applied to American democracy. Although political deviance—the violation of unwritten rules of civility, of respect for the press, of *not lying*—did not originate with Donald Trump, his presidency is accelerating it. Under President Trump, America has been defining political deviancy down. The president's routine use of personal insult, bullying, and lying, has, inevitably, helped to normalize such practices. Trump's tweets may trigger outrage from the media, Democrats, and some Republicans, but the effectiveness of their responses is limited by the sheer quantity of violations. As Moynihan observed, in the face of widespread deviance, we become overwhelmed—and then desensitized. We grow accustomed to what we previously thought to be scandalous.

Furthermore, Trump's deviance has been tolerated by the Republican Party, which has helped make it acceptable to much of the Republican electorate. To be sure, many Republicans have condemned Trump's most egregious behavior. But these one-off statements are not very punitive. All but one Republican senator voted with President Trump at least 85 percent of the time during his first seven months in office. Even Senators Ben Sasse of Nebraska and Jeff Flake of Arizona, who often strongly condemned the president's norm violations, voted with him 94 percent of the time. There is no “containment” strategy for an endless stream of offensive tweets. Unwilling to pay the

political price of breaking with their own president, Republicans find themselves with little alternative but to constantly redefine what is and isn't tolerable.

This will have terrible consequences for our democracy. President Trump's assault on basic norms has expanded the bounds of acceptable political behavior. We may already be seeing some of the consequences. In May 2017, Greg Gianforte, the Republican candidate in a special election for Congress, body-slammed a reporter from *The Guardian* who was asking him about health care reform. Gianforte was charged with misdemeanor assault—but he won the election. More generally, a YouGov poll carried out for *The Economist* in mid-2017 revealed a striking level of intolerance toward the media, especially among Republicans. When asked whether or not they favored permitting the courts to shut down media outlets for presenting information that is “biased or inaccurate,” 45 percent of Republicans who were polled said they favored it, whereas only 20 percent were opposed. More than 50 percent of Republicans supported the idea of imposing fines for biased or inaccurate reporting. In other words, a majority of Republican voters said they support the kind of media repression seen in recent years in Ecuador, Turkey, and Venezuela.

Two National Rifle Association recruiting videos were released in the summer of 2017. In the first video, NRA spokeswoman Dana Loesch speaks about Democrats and the use of force:

They use their schools to teach children that their president is another Hitler. They use their movie stars and singers and comedy shows and award shows to repeat their narrative over and over again. And then

they use their ex-president to endorse the “resistance.” All to make them march, to make them protest, to make them scream racism and sexism and xenophobia and homophobia. To smash windows, to burn cars, to shut down interstates and airports, bully and terrorize the law-abiding, until the only option left is for the police to do their jobs and stop the madness. And when that happens, they use it as an excuse for their outrage. The only way we stop this, the only way we save our country and our freedom, is to fight the violence of lies with the clenched fist of truth.

In the second video, Loesch issues a not-so-subtle warning of violence against the *New York Times*:

We've had it with your pretentious . . . assertion that you are in any way truth- or fact-based journalism. Consider this the shot across your proverbial bow. . . . In short, we're coming for you.

The NRA is not a small, fringe organization. It claims five million members and is closely tied to the Republican Party—Donald Trump and Sarah Palin are lifetime members. Yet it now uses words that in the past we would have regarded as dangerously politically deviant.

Norms are the soft guardrails of democracy; as they break down, the zone of acceptable political behavior expands, giving rise to discourse and action that could imperil democracy. Behavior that was once considered unthinkable in American politics is becoming thinkable. Even if Donald Trump does not break the hard guardrails of our constitutional democracy, he has increased the likelihood that a future president will . . .

Saving Democracy

Writing this book has reminded us that American democracy is not as exceptional as we sometimes believe. There's nothing in our Constitution or our culture to immunize us against democratic breakdown. We have experienced political catastrophe before, when regional and partisan enmities so divided the nation that it collapsed into civil war. Our constitutional system recovered, and Republican and Democratic leaders developed new norms and practices that would undergird more than a century of political stability. But that stability came at the price of racial exclusion and authoritarian single-party rule in the South. It was only after 1965 that the United States fully democratized. And, paradoxically, that very process began a fundamental realignment of the American electorate that has once again left our parties deeply polarized. This polarization, deeper than at any time since the end of Reconstruction, has triggered the epidemic of norm breaking that now challenges our democracy.

There is a mounting perception that democracy is in retreat all over the world. Venezuela. Thailand. Turkey. Hungary. Poland. Larry Diamond, perhaps the foremost authority on democracy

worldwide, believes we have entered a period of democratic recession. International conditions are clearly less favorable for democracy today than they were in the years following the end of the Cold War. During the 1990s, Western liberal democracies were unrivaled in their military, economic, and ideological power, and Western-style democracy was widely viewed as the "only game in town." Two decades later, however, the global balance of power has shifted. The EU and the US have seen their global influence erode, while China and Russia appear increasingly ascendant. And with the emergence of new authoritarian models in Russia, Turkey, Venezuela and elsewhere, democracy now seems less unassailable. Might America's current crises be part of a global wave of democratic backsliding?

We are skeptical. Prior to Donald Trump's election, claims about a global democratic recession were exaggerated. Although international conditions grew more unfavorable to democracy in the early twenty-first century, existing democracies have proven remarkably robust in the face of these challenges. The number of democracies in the world has not declined. Rather, it has remained steady since peaking in around the year 2005. Backsliders make headlines and capture our attention, but for every Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela there is a Colombia, Sri Lanka, or Tunisia—countries that have grown *more* democratic over the last decade. And importantly, the vast majority of the world's democracies—from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Peru to Greece, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Romania to Ghana, India, South Korea, South Africa, and Taiwan—remained intact through 2017.

Western democracies have been wracked by domestic crises of confidence in recent years. With weak economies, growing skepticism of the EU, and the rise of anti-immigrant political parties, there is much to worry about in western Europe. The

radical right's recent electoral success in France, Netherlands, Germany, and Austria, for example, has raised concerns about the stability of European democracies. In Britain, the Brexit debate deeply polarized politics. In November 2016, in the wake of a court decision requiring parliamentary approval to proceed with Brexit, *The Daily Mail* aggressively echoed Donald Trump's language, dubbing the judges "Enemies of the People." And the Conservative government's invocation of the so-called Henry VIII clause, potentially allowing Brexit to proceed without parliamentary approval, has worried critics, including some Tory backbenchers. Thus far, however, basic democratic norms remain largely intact in western Europe.

But Trump's rise may itself increasingly pose a challenge to global democracy. Between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Obama presidency, U.S. governments maintained a broadly prodemocratic foreign policy. There were numerous exceptions: Wherever America's strategic interests were at stake, as in China, Russia, and the Middle East, democracy disappeared from the agenda. But in much of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, U.S. governments used diplomatic pressure, economic assistance, and other foreign-policy tools to oppose authoritarianism and press for democratization during the post-Cold War era. The 1990–2015 period was easily the most democratic quarter century in world history—partly because Western powers broadly supported democracy. That may now be changing. Under Donald Trump, the United States appears to be abandoning its role as democracy promoter for the first time since the Cold War. President Trump's is the least prodemocratic of any U.S. administration since Nixon's. Moreover, America is no longer a democratic model. A country whose president attacks the press, threatens to lock up his rival, and declares that he might not accept election results cannot

credibly defend democracy. Both existing and potential autocrats are likely to be emboldened with Trump in the White House. So even if the idea of a global democratic recession was largely a myth before 2016, the Trump presidency—together with the crisis of the EU, the rise of China, and the growing aggressiveness of Russia—could help make it a reality.

Turning back to our own country, we see three possible futures for a post-Trump America. The first, and most optimistic, is a swift democratic recovery. In this scenario, President Trump fails politically: He either loses public support and is not re-elected or, more dramatically, is impeached or forced to resign. The implosion of Trump's presidency and the triumph of the anti-Trump resistance energizes the Democrats, who then sweep back into power and reverse Trump's most egregious policies. If President Trump were to fail badly enough, public disgust could even motivate reforms that improve the quality of our democracy, as occurred in the aftermath of Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974. Republican leaders, having paid a heavy price for their association with Trump, might end their flirtation with extremist politics. In this future, America's reputation in the world would be quickly restored. The Trump interlude would be taught in schools, recounted in films, and recited in historical works as an era of tragic mistakes where catastrophe was avoided and American democracy saved.

This is certainly the future many of us hope for. But it is unlikely. Recall that the assault on long-standing democratic norms—and the underlying polarization driving it—began well before Donald Trump ascended to the White House. The soft guardrails of American democracy have been weakening for decades; simply removing President Trump will not miraculously

restore them. Although Trump's presidency may ultimately be seen as a momentary aberration with only modest footprints on our institutions, ending it may not be enough to restore a healthy democracy.

A second, much darker future is one in which President Trump and the Republicans continue to win with a white nationalist appeal. Under this scenario, a pro-Trump GOP would retain the presidency, both houses of Congress, and the vast majority of statehouses, and it would eventually gain a solid majority in the Supreme Court. It would then use the techniques of constitutional hardball to manufacture durable white electoral majorities. This could be done through a combination of large-scale deportation, immigration restrictions, the purging of voter rolls, and the adoption of strict voter ID laws. Measures to reengineer the electorate would likely be accompanied by elimination of the filibuster and other rules that protect Senate minorities, so that Republicans could impose their agenda even with narrow majorities. These measures may appear extreme, but every one of them has been at least contemplated by the Trump administration.

Efforts to shore up the Republican Party by engineering a new white majority would, of course, be profoundly antidemocratic. Such measures would trigger resistance from a broad range of forces, including progressives, minority groups, and much of the private sector. This resistance could lead to escalating confrontation and even violent conflict, which, in turn, could bring heightened police repression and private vigilantism—in the name of “law and order.” For a sense of how such a crackdown might be framed, watch recent NRA recruitment videos or listen to how Republican politicians talk about Black Lives Matter.

Such a nightmare scenario isn't likely, but it also isn't inconceivable. It is difficult to find examples of societies in which shrinking ethnic majorities gave up their dominant status with-

out a fight. In Lebanon, the demographic decline of dominant Christian groups contributed to a fifteen-year civil war. In Israel, the demographic threat created by the de facto annexation of the West Bank is pushing the country toward a political system that two of its former prime ministers have compared to apartheid. And closer to home, in the aftermath of Reconstruction, southern Democrats responded to the threat posed by black suffrage by disenfranchising African Americans for nearly a century. Although white nationalists remain a minority within the GOP, the growing push for strict voter ID laws and the purging of voter rolls—championed by influential Republicans Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Commission on Election Integrity Co-chair Kris Kobach—suggest that electoral reengineering is on the GOP agenda.

The third, and in our view, most likely, post-Trump future is one marked by polarization, more departures from unwritten political conventions, and increasing institutional warfare—in other words, democracy without solid guardrails. President Trump and Trumpism may well fail in this scenario, but that failure would do little to narrow the divide between parties or reverse the decline in mutual toleration and forbearance.

To see what politics without guardrails might look like in the United States, consider North Carolina today. North Carolina is a classic “purple” state. With a diversified economy and an internationally recognized university system, it is wealthier, more urban, and better educated than most southern states. It is also demographically diverse, with African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos making up about a third of the population. All this makes North Carolina more hospitable terrain for Democrats than are the states of the Deep South. North Carolina's electorate resembles the national one: It is evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, with Democrats dominant

in such urban centers as Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham and Republicans dominant in rural areas.

The state has become, in the words of Duke law professor J. J. Jedediah Purdy, a “microcosm of the country’s hyper-partisan politics and growing mutual mistrust.” Over the last decade, partisans have battled over Republican-imposed abortion restrictions, the Republican governor’s refusal of Medicaid as part of the Affordable Care Act, a proposed constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, and, most famous, the 2016 Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (the “Bathroom Bill”), which barred local governments from allowing transgender people to use public bathrooms for the sex they identify as. All these initiatives triggered intense opposition. As one veteran Republican put it, state politics has become “more polarized and more acrimonious than I’ve ever seen it. . . . And I worked for Jesse Helms.”

By most accounts, North Carolina’s descent into all-out political warfare began after the Republicans won control of the state legislature in 2010. The following year, the legislature approved a redistricting plan that was widely viewed as “racially gerrymandered”—districts were carved out in ways that concentrated African American voters into a small number of districts, thereby diluting their electoral weight and maximizing Republican seat gains. Progressive pastor William Barber, leader of the Moral Mondays movement, described the new districts as “apartheid voting districts.” The changes enabled Republicans to capture nine of the state’s thirteen congressional seats in 2012—even though Democrats cast more votes statewide.

After Republican Pat McCrory’s 2012 gubernatorial victory gave Republicans control of all three branches of government, the state GOP tried to lock in its dominance for the long haul. Armed with the governorship, both legislative chambers, and a majority on the state Supreme Court, Republican leaders launched an am-

bitious string of reforms that appeared designed to skew the political game. They began by demanding access to background data on voters across the state. With this information in hand, the legislature passed a series of electoral reforms making it harder for voters to cast their ballots. They passed a strict voter ID law, reduced opportunities for early voting, ended preregistration for sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, eliminated same-day registration, and slashed the number of polling places in several key counties. New data allowed the Republicans to design the reforms which appeared to have the effect of targeting African American voters, as a federal appeals court put it, with “almost surgical precision.” And when an appeals court suspended the execution of the new laws, Republicans used their control of the state’s election boards to implement several of them anyway.

Institutional warfare persisted after Democrat Roy Cooper narrowly defeated McCrory for the governorship in 2016. McCrory refused to concede the race for nearly a month, as Republicans made baseless accusations of voter fraud. But that was only the beginning. After McCrory finally conceded in December 2016, Republicans called a “surprise special session” of the state legislature. In a testament to how far politics had deteriorated, rumors spread of an impending “legislative coup,” in which Republicans would hand the election to McCrory by exploiting a law allowing legislators to intervene when the results of a gubernatorial election are challenged.

No such coup occurred, but in what the *New York Times* described as a “brazen power grab,” the special session passed several measures to reduce the power of the incoming Democratic governor. The Senate granted itself the authority to confirm gubernatorial cabinet appointments, and it empowered the sitting Republican governor to transfer temporary political appointees into permanent positions. Outgoing governor McCrory quickly granted tenure to nearly one thousand of his handpicked governa-

torial staffers—essentially “packing” the executive branch. Republicans then changed the composition of the state’s election boards, which were responsible for local rules involving gerrymandering, voter registration, voter ID requirements, voting hours, and the distribution of polling places. The boards had been under the control of the sitting governor, who could award his party a majority of seats; now the GOP created a system of equal partisan representation. In another twist, the chair of the election boards would rotate between the two parties each year, with the party with the second-largest membership (the GOP) holding the chair in even years—which are election years. A few months later, the legislature voted to shrink the state court of appeals by three seats, effectively stealing three judicial appointments from Governor Cooper.

Although the racially gerrymandered districts, the 2013 voter law, and the reform of the election boards were later struck down by the courts, their passage revealed a Republican Party willing to leverage its full power to cripple its political adversaries. Congressman David Price, a Democrat from Chapel Hill, said the legislative crisis taught him that “American democracy may be more fragile than we realized.”

North Carolina offers a window into what politics without guardrails looks like—and a possible glimpse into America’s future. When partisan rivals become enemies, political competition descends into warfare, and our institutions turn into weapons. The result is a system hovering constantly on the brink of crisis.

This grim scenario highlights a central lesson of this book: When American democracy has worked, it has relied upon two norms that we often take for granted—mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance. Treating rivals as legitimate contenders for power and underutilizing one’s institutional prerogatives in the

spirit of fair play are not written into the American Constitution. Yet without them, our constitutional checks and balances will not operate as we expect them to. When French thinker Baron de Montesquieu pioneered the notion of separation of powers in his 1748 work *The Spirit of the Laws*, he worried little about what we today call norms. Montesquieu believed the hard architecture of political institutions might be enough to constrain overreaching power—that constitutional design was not unlike an engineering problem, a challenge of crafting institutions so that ambition could be used to counteract ambition, even when political leaders were flawed. Many of our founders believed this, as well.

History quickly revealed that the founders were mistaken. Without innovations such as political parties and their accompanying norms, the Constitution they so carefully constructed in Philadelphia would not have survived. Institutions were more than just formal rules; they encompassed the shared understandings of appropriate behavior that overlay them. The genius of the first generation of America’s political leaders was not that they created foolproof institutions, but that, in addition to designing very good institutions, they—gradually and with difficulty—established a set of shared beliefs and practices that helped make those institutions work.

The strength of the American political system, it has often been said, rests on what Swedish Nobel Prize-winning economist Gunnar Myrdal called the American Creed: the principles of individual freedom and egalitarianism. Written into our founding documents and repeated in classrooms, speeches, and editorial pages, freedom and equality are self-justifying values. But they are not self-executing. Mutual toleration and institutional forbearance are procedural principles—they tell politicians how to behave, beyond the bounds of law, to make our institutions function. We should regard these procedural values

as also sitting at the center of the American Creed—for without them, our democracy would not work.

This has important implications for how citizens oppose the Trump administration. In the wake of the 2016 election, many progressive opinion makers concluded that Democrats needed to “fight like Republicans.” If Republicans were going to break the rules, the argument went, Democrats had no choice but to respond in kind. Acting with self-restraint and civility while the other side abandoned forbearance would be like a boxer entering the ring with a hand tied behind his back. When confronted with a bully who is willing to use any means necessary to win, those who play by the rules risk playing the sucker. The GOP’s refusal to allow President Obama to fill a Supreme Court vacancy left Democrats feeling sucker-punched, particularly after Trump’s victory ensured that they would get away with it. Political scientist and writer David Faris typified the calls to “fight dirty”:

The Democratic negotiating position on all issues . . . should be very simple: You will give us Merrick Garland or you may go die in a fire. . . . Not only that, but they should do what they should have done the day Antonin Scalia died: Make it clear that the next time the Democrats control the Senate while the Republican Party controls the presidency. . . . there will be an extraordinarily high price to pay for what just transpired. The next Republican president facing divided government will get *nothing*. . . . Zero confirmations. No judges, not even to the lowliest district court in the country. No Cabinet heads. No laws.

Immediately after President Trump’s election, some progressives called for actions to prevent him from assuming office. In

an op-ed entitled “Buck Up, Democrats, and Fight Like Republicans,” published a month *before* Trump’s inauguration, Dahlia Lithwick and David S. Cohen lamented that Democrats were “doing little to stop him.” Although there was “no shortage of legal theories that could challenge Mr. Trump’s anointment,” they wrote, Democrats were not pursuing them. Lithwick and Cohen argued that Democrats “should be fighting tooth and nail” to prevent Donald Trump from taking office—pushing recounts and fraud investigations in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, seeking to sway the Electoral College, and even trying to overturn President Trump’s victory in court.

On Inauguration Day, some Democrats questioned Donald Trump’s legitimacy as president. Representative Jerry McNerney of California boycotted the inauguration, claiming that the election “lacks legitimacy” because of Russian interference; likewise, Representative John Lewis of Georgia declared that he did not view President Trump as a “legitimate president.” Nearly seventy House Democrats boycotted Trump’s inauguration.

After Trump was installed in the White House, some progressives called on Democrats to “take a page from the GOP playbook and obstruct everything.” Markos Moulitsas, founder of the website *Daily Kos*, declared, for example, that “there is nothing that should be going through that Senate without Republicans having to fight. I don’t care if it’s the morning prayer. Everything should be a fight.”

Some Democrats even raised the specter of an early impeachment. Less than two weeks after Trump’s inauguration, Representative Maxine Waters tweeted, “my greatest desire [is] to lead @realDonaldTrump right into impeachment.” Impeachment talk picked up after FBI Director James Comey was fired, reinforced by Trump’s sliding popularity, which raised Democrats’ hopes of winning the House majority necessary to

lead an impeachment process. In a May 2017 interview, Waters declared, “Some people don’t even want to mention the word. It’s almost as if it’s too grandiose an idea. It’s too hard to do, just too much to think about. I don’t see it that way.”

In our view, the idea that Democrats should “fight like Republicans” is misguided. First of all, evidence from other countries suggests that such a strategy often plays directly into the hands of authoritarians. Scorched-earth tactics often erode support for the opposition by scaring off moderates. And they unify progovernment forces, as even dissidents within the incumbent party close ranks in the face of an uncompromising opposition. And when the opposition fights dirty, it provides the government with justification for cracking down.

This is what happened in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. Although the first few years of Chávez’s presidency were democratic, opponents found his populist discourse terrifying. Fearful that Chávez would steer Venezuela toward Cuban-style socialism, they tried to remove him preemptively—and by any means necessary. In April 2002, opposition leaders backed a military coup, which not only failed but destroyed their image as democrats. Undeterred, the opposition launched an indefinite general strike in December 2002, seeking to shut the country down until Chávez resigned. The strike lasted two months, costing Venezuela an estimated \$4.5 billion and ultimately failing. Anti-Chávez forces then boycotted the 2005 legislative elections, but this did little more than allow the *chavistas* to gain total control over Congress. All three strategies had backfired. Not only did they fail to knock Chávez out, but they eroded the opposition’s public support, allowed Chávez to tag his rivals as antidemocratic, and handed the government an excuse to purge the military, the police, and the courts, arrest or exile dissidents, and close independent media outlets. Weak-

ened and discredited, the opposition could not stop the regime’s subsequent descent into authoritarianism.

Opposition strategies in Colombia under President Álvaro Uribe were more successful. Uribe, who was elected in 2002, launched a power grab not unlike Chávez’s: His administration attacked critics as subversive and terrorist, spied on opponents and journalists, tried to weaken the courts, and twice sought to modify the constitution to run for another term. In response, unlike their Venezuelan counterparts, the Colombian opposition never attempted to topple Uribe through extraconstitutional means. Instead, as political scientist Laura Gamboa shows, they focused their efforts on the congress and the courts. This made it more difficult for Uribe to question his opponents’ democratic credentials or justify cracking down on them. Despite Uribe’s abuses, Venezuelan-style institutional warfare did not occur, and Colombia’s democratic institutions did not come under threat. In February 2010, the Constitutional Court struck down Uribe’s bid for a third term as unconstitutional, forcing him to step down after two terms. The lesson is this: Where institutional channels exist, opposition groups should use them.

Even if Democrats were to succeed in weakening or removing President Trump via hardball tactics, their victory would be Pyrrhic—for they would inherit a democracy stripped of its remaining protective guardrails. If the Trump administration were brought to its knees by obstructionism, or if President Trump were impeached without a strong bipartisan consensus, the effect would be to reinforce—and perhaps hasten—the dynamics of partisan antipathy and norm erosion that helped bring Trump to power to begin with. As much as a third of the country would likely view Trump’s impeachment as the machinations of a vast left-wing conspiracy—maybe even as a coup. American politics would be left dangerously unmoored.

This sort of escalation rarely ends well. If Democrats do not work to restore norms of mutual toleration and forbearance, their next president will likely confront an opposition willing to use any means necessary to defeat them. And if partisan rifts deepen and our unwritten rules continue to fray, Americans could eventually elect a president who is even more dangerous than Trump.

Opposition to the Trump administration's authoritarian behavior should be muscular, but it should seek to preserve, rather than violate, democratic rules and norms. Where possible, opposition should center on Congress, the courts, and, of course, elections. If Trump is defeated via democratic institutions, it will strengthen those institutions.

Protest should be viewed in a similar way. Public protest is a basic right and an important activity in any democracy, but its aim should be the defense of rights and institutions, rather than their disruption. In an important study of the effects of black protest in the 1960s, political scientist Omar Wasow found that black-led nonviolent protest fortified the national civil rights agenda in Washington and broadened public support for that agenda. By contrast, violent protest led to a decline in white support and may have tipped the 1968 election from Humphrey to Nixon.

We should learn from our own history. Anti-Trump forces should build a broad prodemocratic coalition. Contemporary coalition building is often a coming-together of like-minded groups: Progressive synagogues, mosques, Catholic parishes, and Presbyterian churches may form an interfaith coalition to combat poverty or racial intolerance, or Latino, faith-based, and civil liberties groups might form a coalition to defend immigrant rights. Coalitions of the like-minded are important, but they are not enough to defend democracy. The most effective coalitions are those that bring together groups with

dissimilar—even opposing—views on many issues. They are built not among friends but among adversaries. An effective coalition in defense of American democracy, then, would likely require that progressives forge alliances with business executives, religious (and particularly white evangelical) leaders, and red-state Republicans. Business leaders may not be natural allies of Democratic activists, but they have good reasons to oppose an unstable and rule-breaking administration. And they can be powerful partners. Think of recent boycott movements aimed at state governments that refused to honor Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, continued to fly the Confederate flag, or violated gay or transgender rights. When major businesses join progressive boycotts, they often succeed.

Building coalitions that extend beyond our natural allies is difficult. It requires a willingness to set aside, for the moment, issues we care deeply about. If progressives make positions on issues such as abortion rights or single-payer health care a “litmus test” for coalition membership, the chances for building a coalition that includes evangelicals and Republican business executives will be nil. We must lengthen our time horizons, swallow hard, and make tough concessions. This does *not* mean abandoning the causes that matter to us. It means temporarily overlooking disagreements in order to find common moral ground.

A broad opposition coalition would have important benefits. For one, it would strengthen the defenders of democracy by appealing to a much wider sector of American society. Rather than confining anti-Trumpism to progressive blue-state circles, it would extend it to a wider range of America. Such broad involvement is critical to isolating and defeating authoritarian governments.

In addition, whereas a narrow (urban, secular, progressive) anti-Trump coalition would reinforce the current axes of partisan division, a broader coalition would crosscut these axes

and maybe even help dampen them. A political movement that brings together—even if temporarily—Bernie Sanders supporters and businesspeople, evangelicals and secular feminists, and small-town Republicans and urban Black Lives Matter supporters, will open channels of communication across the vast chasm that has emerged between our country's two main partisan camps. And it might help foster more crosscutting allegiances in a society that has too few of them. Where a society's political divisions are crosscutting, we line up on different sides of issues with different people at different times. We may disagree with our neighbors on abortion but agree with them on health care; we may dislike another neighbor's views on immigration but agree with them on the need to raise the minimum wage. Such alliances help us build and sustain norms of mutual toleration. When we agree with our political rivals at least some of the time, we are less likely to view them as mortal enemies.

Thinking about how to resist the Trump administration's abuses is clearly important. However, the fundamental problem facing American democracy remains extreme partisan division—one fueled not just by policy differences but by deeper sources of resentment, including racial and religious differences. America's great polarization preceded the Trump presidency, and it is very likely to endure beyond it.

Political leaders have two options in the face of extreme polarization. First, they can take society's divisions as a given but try to counteract them through elite-level cooperation and compromise. This is what Chilean politicians did. As we saw in Chapter 5, intense conflict between the Socialists and the Christian Democrats helped destroy Chilean democracy in 1973. A profound distrust between the two parties persisted for years afterward, trumping

their shared revulsion toward Pinochet's dictatorship. Exiled Socialist leader Ricardo Lagos, who lectured at the University of North Carolina, recalled that when former Christian Democratic president Eduardo Frei Montalva visited the university in 1975, he decided that he couldn't bear to talk to him—so he called in sick.

But eventually, politicians started talking. In 1978, Lagos returned to Chile and was invited to dinner by former Christian Democratic senator Tomás Reyes. They began to meet regularly. At around the same time, Christian Democratic leader Patricio Aylwin attended meetings of lawyers and academics from diverse partisan backgrounds, many of whom had crossed paths in courtrooms while defending political prisoners. These "Group of 24" meetings were just casual dinners in members' homes, but according to Aylwin, they "built up trust among those of us who had been adversaries." Eventually, the conversations bore fruit. In August 1985, the Christian Democrats, Socialists, and nineteen other parties gathered in Santiago's elegant Spanish Circle Club and signed the National Accord for a Transition to a Full Democracy. The pact formed the basis for the Democratic Concertation coalition. The coalition developed a practice of "consensus politics," in which key decisions were negotiated between Socialist and Christian Democratic leaders. It was successful. Not only did the Democratic Concertation topple Pinochet in a 1988 plebiscite, but it won the presidency in 1989 and held it for two decades.

The Concertation developed a governing style that broke sharply with the politics of the 1970s. Fearful that renewed conflict would threaten Chile's new democracy, leaders developed a practice of informal cooperation—which Chileans called "democracy of agreements"—in which presidents consulted the leaders of all parties before submitting legislation to congress. Pinochet's 1980 constitution had created a dominant executive with the authority to impose budgets more or less unilaterally, but President Aylwin,

a Christian Democrat, consulted extensively with the Socialists and other parties before submitting his proposed budgets. And he didn't just consult his allies. Aylwin also negotiated legislation with right-wing parties that had backed the dictatorship and defended Pinochet. According to political scientist Peter Siavelis, the new norms "helped stave off potentially destabilizing conflicts both within the coalition and between the coalition and the opposition." Chile has been one of Latin America's most stable and successful democracies over the last three decades.

It is doubtful that Democrats and Republicans can follow the Chilean path. It's easy for politicians to bemoan the absence of civility and cooperation, or to wax nostalgic about the bipartisanship of a bygone era. But norm creation is a collective venture—it is only possible when a critical mass of leaders accepts and plays by new unwritten rules. This usually happens when political leaders from across the spectrum have stared into the abyss and realized that if they do not find a way of addressing polarization, democracy will die. Often, it is only when politicians suffer the trauma of violent dictatorship, as they did in Chile, or even civil war, as in Spain, that the stakes truly become clear.

The alternative to learning to cooperate despite underlying polarization is to overcome that polarization. In the United States, political scientists have proposed an array of electoral reforms—an end to gerrymandering, open primaries, obligatory voting, alternative rules for electing members of Congress, to name just a few—that might mitigate partisan enmity in America. The evidence of their effectiveness, however, is far from clear. We think it would be more valuable to focus on two underlying forces driving American polarization: racial and religious realignment and growing economic inequality. Addressing these social foundations, we believe, requires a reshuffling of what America's political parties stand for.

The Republican Party has been the main driver of the chasm between the parties. Since 2008, the GOP has at times behaved like an antisystem party in its obstructionism, partisan hostility, and extremist policy positions. Its twenty-five-year march to the right was made possible by the hollowing out of its organizational core. Over the last quarter century, the party's leadership structure has been eviscerated—first by the rise of well-funded outside groups (such as Americans for Tax Freedom, Americans for Prosperity, and many others) whose fund-raising prowess allowed them to more or less dictate the policy agenda of many GOP elected officials, but also by the mounting influence of Fox News and other right-wing media. Wealthy outside donors such as the Koch brothers and influential media personalities exert greater influence over elected Republican officials than does the GOP's own leadership. Republicans still win elections across the country, but what used to be called the Republican "establishment" has today become a phantom. This hollowing out has left the party vulnerable to takeover by extremists.

Reducing polarization requires that the Republican Party be reformed, if not refounded outright. First of all, the GOP must rebuild its own establishment. This means regaining leadership control in four key areas: finance, grassroots organization, messaging, and candidate selection. Only if the party leadership can free itself from the clutches of outside donors and right-wing media can it go about transforming itself. This entails major changes: Republicans must marginalize extremist elements; they must build a more diverse electoral constituency, such that the party no longer depends so heavily on its shrinking white Christian base; and they must find ways to win elections without appealing to white nationalism, or what Republican Arizona senator Jeff Flake calls the "sugar high of populism, nativism, and demagoguery."

A refounding of America's major center-right party is

a tall order, but there are historical precedents for such transformations—and under even more challenging circumstances. And where it has been successful, conservative party reform has catalyzed democracy's rebirth. A particularly dramatic case is the democratization of West Germany after the Second World War. At the center of this achievement was an underappreciated development: the formation of Germany's center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) out of the wreckage of a discredited conservative and right-wing tradition.

Before the 1940s, Germany never had a conservative party that was both well-organized and electorally successful, on the one hand, and moderate and democratic on the other. German conservatism was perennially wracked by internal division and organizational weakness. In particular, the highly charged divide between conservative Protestants and Catholics created a political vacuum on the center-right that extremist and authoritarian forces could exploit. This dynamic reached its nadir in Hitler's march to power.

After 1945, Germany's center-right was refounded on a different basis. The CDU separated itself from extremists and authoritarians—it was founded primarily by conservative figures (such as Konrad Adenauer) with “unassailable” anti-Nazi credentials. The party's founding statements made clear that it was directly opposed to the prior regime and all it had stood for. CDU leader Andreas Hermes gave a sense of the scale of the rupture, commenting in 1945: “An old world has sunk and we want to build a new one. . . .” The CDU offered a clear vision of a democratic future for Germany: a “Christian” society that rejected dictatorship and embraced freedom and tolerance.

The CDU also broadened and diversified its base, by recruiting both Catholics and Protestants into the fold. This

was a challenge. But the trauma of Nazism and World War II convinced conservative Catholic and Protestant leaders to overcome the long-standing differences that had once splintered German society. As one regional CDU leader put it, “The close collaboration of Catholics and Protestants, which occurred in the prisons, dungeons, and concentration camps, brought to an end the old conflict and began to build bridges.” As new Catholic and Protestant CDU leaders went door-to-door to Catholic and Protestant homes during the founding years of 1945–46, they conjured into existence a new party of the center-right that would reshape German society. The CDU became a pillar of Germany's postwar democracy.

The United States played a major role in encouraging the formation of the CDU. It is a great historical irony, then, that Americans can today learn from these successful efforts to help rescue our own democracy. To be clear: We are not equating Donald Trump or any other Republicans with German Nazis. Yet the successful rebuilding of the German center-right offers some useful lessons for the GOP. Not unlike their German counterparts, Republicans today must expel extremists from their ranks, break sharply with the Trump administration's authoritarian and white nationalist orientation, and find a way to broaden the party's base beyond white Christians. The CDU may offer a model: If the GOP were to abandon white nationalism and soften its extreme free-market ideology, a broad religious conservative appeal could allow it to build a sustainable base, for example, among Protestants and Catholics, while also potentially attracting a substantial number of minority voters.

The rebuilding of German conservatism, of course, followed a major catastrophe. The CDU had no choice but to reinvent itself. The question before Republicans today is whether such

a reinvention can occur before we plunge into a deeper crisis. Can leaders muster the foresight and political courage to reorient what has become an increasingly dysfunctional political party before further damage is done, or will we need a catastrophe to inspire the change?

Although the Democratic Party has not been the principal driver of America's deepening polarization, it could nevertheless play a role in reducing it. Some Democrats have suggested the party focus on recapturing the so-called white working class, or non-college-educated white voters. This was a prominent theme in the wake of Hillary Clinton's traumatic 2016 defeat. Both Bernie Sanders and some moderates argued passionately that Democrats must win back the elusive blue-collar voters who abandoned them in the Rust Belt, Appalachia, and elsewhere. To do this, many opinion-makers argued, the Democrats needed to back away from their embrace of immigrants and so-called identity politics—a vaguely defined term that often encompasses the promotion of ethnic diversity and, more recently, anti-police-violence initiatives, such as Black Lives Matter. In a *New York Times* op-ed, Mark Penn and Andrew Stein urged Democrats to abandon “identity politics” and moderate their stance on immigration to win back white working-class votes. Though rarely voiced, the core message is this: Democrats must reduce the influence of ethnic minorities to win back the white working class.

Such a strategy might well reduce partisan polarization. If the Democratic Party were to abandon the demands of ethnic minorities or relegate them to the bottom of the agenda, it would almost certainly win back some white lower- and middle-income white voters. In effect, the party would return to what it was in the 1980s and 1990s—a party whose public face was predominantly white and in which minority constitu-

encies were, at most, junior partners. The Democrats would—literally—begin to look more like their Republican rivals. And as they moved closer to Trumpist positions on immigration and racial equality (that is, accepting less of both), they would appear less threatening to the Republican base.

We think this is a terrible idea. Seeking to diminish minority groups' influence in the party—and we cannot emphasize this strongly enough—is the wrong way to reduce polarization. It would repeat some of our country's most shameful mistakes. The founding of the American republic left racial domination intact, which eventually led to the Civil War. When Democrats and Republicans finally reconciled in the wake of a failed Reconstruction, their conciliation was again based on racial exclusion. The reforms of the 1960s gave Americans a third chance to build a truly multiethnic democracy. It is imperative that we succeed, extraordinarily difficult though the task is. As our colleague Danielle Allen writes:

The simple fact of the matter is that the world has never built a multiethnic democracy in which no particular ethnic group is in the majority and where political equality, social equality and economies that empower all have been achieved.

This is America's great challenge. We cannot retreat from it.

But there are other ways for Democrats to help restructure the political landscape. The intensity of partisan animosities in America today reflects the combined effect not only of growing ethnic diversity but also of slowed economic growth, stagnant wages in the bottom half of the income distribution, and rising economic inequality. Today's racially tinged partisan polarization reflects the fact that ethnic diversity surged during a period

(1975 to the present) in which economic growth slowed, especially for those at the bottom end of the income distribution. For many Americans, the economic changes of the last few decades have brought decreased job security, longer working hours, fewer prospects for upward mobility, and, consequently, a growth in social resentment. Resentment fuels polarization. One way of tackling our deepening partisan divide, then, would be to genuinely address the bread-and-butter concerns of long-neglected segments of the population—no matter their ethnicity.

Policies aimed at addressing economic inequality can be polarizing or depolarizing, depending on how they are organized. Unlike in many other advanced democracies, in America social policy has relied heavily on means tests—distributing benefits only to those who fall below an income threshold or otherwise qualify. Means-tested programs create the perception among many middle-class citizens that only poor people benefit from social policy. And because race and poverty have historically overlapped in the United States, these policies can be racially stigmatizing. Opponents of social policy have commonly used racially charged rhetoric against means-tested programs—Ronald Reagan’s references to “welfare queens” or “young bucks” buying steaks with food stamps is a prime example. *Welfare* became a pejorative term in America because of a perception of recipients as undeserving.

By contrast, a social policy agenda that sets aside stiff means testing in favor of the more universalistic models found in northern Europe could have a moderating effect on our politics. Social policies that benefit everyone—Social Security and Medicare are prime examples—could help diminish resentment, build bridges across large swaths of the American

electorate, and lock into place social support for more durable income inequality policies to reduce without providing the raw materials for racially motivated backlash. Comprehensive health insurance is a prominent example. Other examples include a much more aggressive raising of the minimum wage, or a universal basic income—a policy that was once seriously considered, and even introduced into Congress, by the Nixon administration. Still another example is “family policy,” or programs that provide paid leave for parents, subsidized day care for children with working parents, and prekindergarten education for nearly everyone. America’s expenditures on families is currently a third of the advanced-country average, putting us on par with Mexico and Turkey. Finally, Democrats could consider more comprehensive labor market policies, such as more extensive job training, wage subsidies for employers to train and retain workers, work-study programs for high school and community-college students, and mobility allowances for displaced employees. Not only do these sorts of policies have the potential to reduce the economic inequality that fuels resentment and polarization, but they could contribute to the formation of a broad, durable coalition that realigns American politics.

Adopting policies to address social and economic inequality is, of course, politically difficult—in part because of the polarization (and resulting institutional gridlock) such policies seek to address. And we are under no illusions about the obstacles to building multiracial coalitions—those including both racial minorities *and* working-class whites. We cannot be certain that universalistic policies would provide the basis for such a coalition—only that they stand a better chance than our current means-tested programs. Difficult as it may be, however, it is imperative that Democrats address the issue of inequality.

It is, after all, more than a question of social justice. The very health of our democracy hinges on it.

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Comparing our current predicament to democratic crises in other parts of the world and at other moments of history, it becomes clear that America is not so different from other nations. Our constitutional system, while older and more robust than any in history, is vulnerable to the same pathologies that have killed democracy elsewhere. Ultimately, then, American democracy depends on us—the citizens of the United States. No single political leader can end a democracy; no single leader can rescue one, either. Democracy is a shared enterprise. Its fate depends on all of us.

In the darkest days of the Second World War, when America's very future was at risk, writer E. B. White was asked by the U.S. Federal Government's Writers' War Board to write a short response to the question "What is democracy?" His answer was unassuming but inspiring. He wrote:

Surely the Board knows what democracy is. It is the line that forms on the right. It is the "don't" in don't shove. It is the hole in the stuffed shirt through which the sawdust slowly trickles; it is the dent in the high hat. Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time. It is the feeling of privacy in the voting booths, the feeling of communion in the libraries, the feeling of vitality everywhere. Democracy is a letter to the editor. Democracy is the score at the beginning of the ninth. It is an idea which hasn't been disproved yet, a song the words of which have not gone bad.

It's the mustard on the hot dog and the cream in the rationed coffee. Democracy is a request from a War Board, in the middle of a morning in the middle of a war, wanting to know what democracy is.

The egalitarianism, civility, sense of freedom, and shared purpose portrayed by E. B. White were the essence of mid-twentieth-century American democracy. Today that vision is under assault not only in the United States but across the industrialized West. Simply restoring the liberal democratic ideals of a bygone era will not be enough to revitalize Western democracies today. We must not only restore democratic norms but extend them through the whole of increasingly diverse societies. This is a daunting challenge: Few societies in history have managed to be both multiracial and truly democratic. But there is precedent—and hope. In Britain and Scandinavia a century ago, working classes were successfully incorporated into liberal democratic systems—a development that many had deemed impossible only a few decades earlier. And in the United States, earlier waves of immigrants—Italian and Irish Catholics, Eastern European Jews—were successfully absorbed into democratic life, notwithstanding many dire predictions to the contrary. History shows us that it is possible to reconcile democracy with diversity. This is the challenge we face. Previous generations of Europeans and Americans made extraordinary sacrifices to defend our democratic institutions against powerful external threats. Our generation, which grew up taking democracy for granted, now faces a different task: We must prevent it from dying from within.

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